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# Food Safety Facts

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Food Safety  
and Inspection  
Service

## Turkey Basics: Handling Precooked Dinners

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Information for Consumers

Revised September 2003

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### Hot from the Oven

**If you eat within 2 hours, handle the hot food as follows:**

- Pick up the food HOT...and keep it HOT. Keeping foods just warm is not enough. Harmful bacteria multiply fastest between 40 and 140 °F.
- Set oven temperature high enough to keep the internal temperature of the turkey and all side dishes at 140 °F or above. Use a food thermometer to check food temperatures. Covering the food will help keep it moist.

**If you will not be eating within 2 hours, handle the hot food as follows:**

- Remove all stuffing from the turkey cavity immediately and refrigerate in shallow containers.
- Reheating a whole turkey is not recommended. Cut turkey into smaller pieces and refrigerate. Slice breast meat; legs and wings may be left whole.
- Refrigerate potatoes, gravy, and vegetables in shallow containers.

- If desired, turkey may be eaten cold.
- Reheat turkey pieces and all side dishes thoroughly to 165 °F, until hot and steaming. Bring gravy to a rolling boil.
- If using a microwave oven, cover food and rotate dish so it heats evenly. Follow the microwave oven manufacturer's instructions.

### Precooked and Refrigerated

**Keep Cold foods COLD.**

- Refrigerate cold foods as soon as possible, always within 2 hours. Serve your meal within 1 to 2 days.
- If desired, turkey may be eaten cold.

**Reheating a Whole Turkey is NOT Recommended.**

- When reheating turkey, slice breast meat. Legs and wings may be left whole. Reheat turkey pieces and all side dishes thoroughly to 165 °F, until hot and steaming. Bring gravy to a rolling boil. If using a microwave oven, cover food and rotate dish so it heats evenly. Follow the microwave oven manufacturer's instructions.

Note: Precooked turkeys with the USDA or the state mark of inspection on the packaging are safe because they have been processed under controlled conditions. Follow package directions for reheating and storing.

## Frozen Precooked Turkey with Side Dishes

### Is the Inspection Mark Visible?

The inspection mark on the packaging tells you the turkey was prepared in a USDA or state inspected plant under controlled conditions. Follow package directions for thawing, reheating, and storing.

### When there are no handling instructions on packaging, follow these steps:

- Thaw the wrapped, precooked frozen turkey on a tray in the refrigerator. Allow at least 24 hours of thawing time for every 5 pounds of turkey. Small packages such as stuffing, gravy, or potatoes will thaw in less time. Side dishes can go from freezer to oven.
- Once the precooked turkey thaws, it can be eaten cold or can be reheated.
- To reheat a turkey, slice breast meat. Legs and wings may be left whole. Reheat turkey pieces and all side dishes thoroughly to 165 °F, until hot and steaming. Bring gravy to a rolling boil. If using a microwave oven, cover food and rotate dish so it heats evenly. Follow the microwave oven manufacturer's instructions.

## Storing Leftovers

Perishable foods should not be left out of the refrigerator for more than 2 hours. Refrigerate or freeze leftovers promptly in shallow containers. It is safe to refreeze leftover turkey and trimmings--even if you purchased them frozen. Wrap tightly for best quality.

## Storage Times for Leftovers

### Refrigerator (40 °F or slightly below)

Cooked Turkey..... 3 to 4 days  
Stuffing and Gravy.....1 to 2 days  
Other Cooked Dishes.....3 to 4 days

### Freezer (0 °F or below)

Turkey slices/pieces, plain.....4 months  
Turkey covered with broth/gravy...6 months  
Cooked poultry dishes.....4 to 6 months  
Stuffing and gravy.....1 month

(Foods frozen for a longer period remain safe, but may become dry and lose flavor.)

### For further information, contact:

USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline:

1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)

1-888-256-7072 (TTY)

E-mail: [mpholine.fsis@usda.gov](mailto:mpholine.fsis@usda.gov)

FSIS Web site: [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov)

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