
Food Safety Facts



Food Safety
and Inspection
Service

Turkey Basics: Safe Thawing

Information for Consumers

Revised September 2003

"The Big Thaw"

Turkeys must be kept at a safe temperature during thawing. While frozen, a turkey is safe indefinitely. However, if the turkey is allowed to thaw at a temperature above 40 °F, any harmful bacteria that may have been present before freezing can begin to grow again unless proper thawing methods are used.

A package of frozen meat or poultry thawing on the counter longer than 2 hours is not safe. Even though the center of the package may still be frozen, the outer layer of the food is in the "danger zone," between 40 and 140 °F -- a temperature range where harmful bacteria multiply rapidly.

There are three safe ways to thaw food: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave oven.

Thawing Frozen Turkeys

Immediately after grocery store checkout, take the frozen turkey home and store it in the freezer until ready to use. Frozen turkeys should not be thawed on the back porch, in the car trunk, in the basement or on the kitchen counter.

It is safe to cook an unstuffed frozen turkey. The cooking time will take at least 50 percent longer than recommended for a fully thawed turkey.

Note: Turkeys purchased stuffed and frozen with the USDA or state mark of inspection on the packaging are safe because they have been processed under controlled conditions. These turkeys should not be thawed before cooking. Follow package directions for handling.

Refrigerator Thawing

When thawing a turkey in the refrigerator, plan ahead. For every 5 pounds of turkey, allow approximately 24 hours of thawing time in a refrigerator set at 40 °F.

Refrigerator Thawing Times

(Whole turkey)

8 to 12 pounds	1 to 2 days
12 to 16 pounds	2 to 3 days
16 to 20 pounds	3 to 4 days
20 to 24 pounds	4 to 5 days

Foods thawed in the refrigerator can be safely refrozen without cooking, though there may be some loss of quality.

Microwave Thawing

Follow the manufacturer's instructions when thawing a turkey in the microwave oven. Plan to cook it immediately after thawing because some areas of the turkey may become warm and begin to cook during microwave thawing.

Cold Water Thawing

Allow about 30 minutes per pound when thawing a turkey in cold water. Be sure the turkey is in leak-proof packaging. Tissues can absorb water like a sponge, resulting in a watery product.

Submerge the turkey in cold water. Change the water every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed.

Cold Water Thawing Times

8 to 12 pounds	4 to 6 hours
12 to 16 pounds	6 to 8 hours
16 to 20 pounds	8 to 10 hours
20 to 24 pounds	10 to 12 hours

Turkeys thawed by the cold water method should be cooked immediately because conditions were not temperature controlled.

For further information, contact:

USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline:

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

1-800-256-7072 (TTY)

E-mail: mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov

FSIS Web site: www.fsis.usda.gov