



**Food Safety and Inspection Service
 United States Department of Agriculture
 Washington, D.C. 20250-3700**

Consumer Education and Information

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Countdown To The Holiday

As Thanksgiving approaches, cooking the traditional turkey dinner gives rise to anxieties and questions. What kind of turkey should I buy? Should I buy a frozen turkey or a fresh one? How do I store my turkey?

A few simple steps will not only ease your holiday fears, but will ensure a delicious and a safe meal for you, your family, and your friends. The following information may help you prepare your special Thanksgiving meal and help you countdown to the holiday.

PLAN AHEAD – Plan your menu several weeks before the holiday. Shopping early will ease the countdown tension for your Thanksgiving meal. Ask these questions to help plan your meal. Do you want a fresh or frozen turkey? Do you have enough space to store a frozen bird if purchased in advance; if not, when should you purchase a turkey? What size bird do you need to buy?

FRESH OR FROZEN – There is no appreciable difference between a fresh or frozen bird. It is just a personal preference.

WHEN TO PURCHASE – If you choose to buy a frozen bird you may do so at any time, but make sure you have adequate storage space in your freezer. If you buy a fresh turkey, be sure you purchase it only 1-2 days before cooking. **Do not buy a prestuffed fresh turkey.**

WHAT SIZE TURKEY TO PURCHASE – Use the following chart as a helpful guide:

Whole bird	1 pound per person
Boneless breast of turkey	1/2 pound per person
Breast of turkey	3/4 pound per person
Prestuffed frozen turkey	1 1/4 pounds per person – keep frozen until ready to cook

THAWING

In refrigerator – Place frozen bird in original wrapper in the refrigerator (40 °F). Allow approximately 24 hours per 5 pounds of turkey. After thawing, keep turkey refrigerated for only 1-2 days, or use this chart to help you countdown to the holiday.

Size of Turkey	Thawing Time in the Refrigerator
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

In cold water – If you forget to thaw the turkey or don't have room in the refrigerator for thawing, don't panic. You can submerge the turkey in cold water and change the water every 30 minutes. Allow about 30 minutes defrosting time per pound of turkey. The following times are suggested for thawing turkey in water.

Size of Turkey	Hours to Defrost
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

In microwave – Microwave thawing is safe if the turkey is not too large. Check the manufacturer's instructions for the size turkey that will fit into your oven, the minutes per pound, and the power level to use for thawing. Cook immediately after thawing.

PREPARATION

The day before Thanksgiving – Make sure you have all the ingredients you need to prepare your holiday meal. Check to make sure you have all the equipment you will need, including a roasting pan large enough to hold your turkey and a meat thermometer. The turkey may be rinsed in cold water the night before and re-wrapped for roasting the next day if you wish. Wet and dry stuffing ingredients can be prepared ahead of time and refrigerated separately. This may also be done on Thanksgiving Day. Mix ingredients just before placing the stuffing inside the turkey cavity or into a casserole dish.

Thanksgiving Day – If you choose to stuff your turkey, stuff loosely. The stuffing should be moist, not dry, since heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment. Place stuffed turkey in oven immediately. You may also cook the stuffing outside the bird in a casserole.

Judging cooking time for your turkey will be easier if the following chart is used. The times listed are for a fresh or thawed turkey in an oven at 325 °F. These times are approximate.

Unstuffed

Size of Turkey	Hours to Prepare
8 to 12 pounds	2 3/4 to 3 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 to 3 3/4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	3 3/4 to 4 1/4 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4 1/4 to 4 1/2 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4 1/2 to 5 hours

Stuffed

Size of Turkey	Hours to Prepare
8 to 12 pounds	3 to 3 1/2 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 1/2 to 4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	4 to 4 1/4 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4 1/4 to 4 3/4 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4 3/4 to 5 1/4 hours

Use a meat thermometer to check the internal temperature of the turkey. When the temperature of the poultry (as measured in the thigh) has reached 180 °F, there is usually no other site in the bird lower than the safe temperature of 160 °F. Check the temperature in several locations, being sure to include the wing joint. All turkey meat, including any that remains pink, is safe to eat as soon as all parts reach at least 160 °F. The stuffing should reach 165 °F, whether cooked inside the bird or in a separate dish.

When turkey is removed from the oven, let it stand 20 minutes. Remove stuffing and carve turkey.

STORING LEFTOVERS

Cut the turkey into small pieces; refrigerate stuffing and turkey separately in shallow containers within 2 hours of cooking. Use leftover turkey and stuffing within 3-4 days; gravy within 1-2 days; or freeze these foods. Reheat thoroughly to a temperature of 165 °F or until hot and steaming.

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For additional food safety information about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1 (800) 535-4555; Washington, DC area, (202) 720-3333; for the hearing-impaired (TTY) 1 (800) 256-7072. The Hotline is staffed by food safety experts weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time. Food safety recordings can be heard 24 hours a day using a touch-tone phone.

The media may contact the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at (301) 504-6258.

Information is also available from the FSIS Web site: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>

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For Further Information Contact:

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Meat and Poultry Hotline:

- 1-800-535-4555 (Toll-free Nationwide)

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