

Tips for preparing your holiday turkey

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The biggest holiday meal of the year is just around the corner. Thanksgiving brings families together from all across the state to share a meal that often centers on roast turkey and all the fixings.

To help you prepare the holiday meal, University of Wisconsin-Extension food scientist Barbara Ingham offers some helpful hints.

“Whether you choose a fresh or frozen turkey is up to you,” says Ingham. “But for both fresh and frozen, allow one pound of turkey per person.”

If the turkey is fresh, buy it only one to two days before you plan to cook it, and store it in the refrigerator until you are ready to place it in the oven. Place a fresh turkey in a pan or on a tray on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator; the pan will catch any juices that may leak. “Do not buy fresh pre-stuffed turkeys,” advises Ingham.

If your turkey is frozen, keep it frozen until you’re ready to thaw it. “There are three ways to safely thaw your turkey: in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in a microwave oven,” says Ingham.

Thawing your turkey

- **In the refrigerator (40°F or below):** Keep the turkey in its original wrapper. Thaw in the refrigerator on a tray or in a pan to catch drips. Once it is completely thawed, the turkey may be stored in the refrigerator an additional 1 to 2 days before cooking. Allow 4–5 days to thaw an average 20-pound turkey in the refrigerator.
- **In cold water:** Make sure the turkey is securely wrapped so that water is not able to leak into the package. It’s usually best to keep the turkey wrapped in the original package. Completely submerge the turkey in cold water. Change the water every 30 minutes as the water starts to warm. Turkeys thawed in this way should be cooked immediately after thawing. Do not refrigerate or refreeze.

Here are some thawing guidelines.

- Size of turkey: 4 to 12 pounds—thaw 1 to 3 days in the refrigerator or 2 to 6 hours in cold water; 12 to 16 pounds—3 to 4 days in the refrigerator or 6 to 8 hours in cold water; 16 to 20 pounds—4 to 5 days in the refrigerator or 8 to 10 hours in cold water; 20 to 24 pounds—5 to 6 days in the refrigerator or 10 to 12 hours in cold water.
- Thawing In the microwave oven: Check your owner’s manual for the size turkey that will fit in your microwave, the minutes per pound and the power level to use for thawing. Remove all outside wrapping and place on a microwave-safe dish to catch any juices that may leak. Cook your turkey immediately after thawing. Do not refreeze or refrigerate a turkey after microwave thawing.

Roasting your turkey

- Set your oven temperature no lower than 325°F.
- Place your turkey or turkey breast on a rack in a shallow roasting pan.
- For optimum safety, stuffing a turkey is not recommended. For more even cooking, it is recommended you cook your stuffing outside the turkey in a casserole dish. Use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of the stuffing. The stuffing must reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F.
- If you choose to stuff your turkey, the ingredients can be prepared ahead of time; however, keep wet and dry ingredients separate. Chill all of the wet ingredients (butter/margarine, cooked celery and onions, broth, etc.). Mix wet and dry ingredients just before loosely filling the turkey cavity. Cook the turkey immediately. Use a food thermometer to make sure the center of the stuffing and the turkey reaches a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F.
- A whole turkey is safe when cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 165°F as measured with a food thermometer. Check the internal temperature in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast.
- For safety’s sake, don’t rely solely on the turkey’s pop-up doneness indicator. Use a thermometer to double-check that the temperature of the turkey in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast reaches 165° F.
- For quality, let the turkey stand for 20 minutes before carving to allow juices to set. The turkey will carve more easily.
- Remove all stuffing from the turkey cavities.

Timetables for turkey roasting (325°F oven temperature)

Use these approximate timetables to determine how long to cook your turkey. Always use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of your turkey and stuffing.

Thawed, unstuffed cooking time:

Pounds	Hours
4 to 8 pounds (breast)	1.5 to 3.25 hours
8 to 12 pounds	2.75 to 3 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 to 3.75 hours
14 to 18 pounds	3.75 to 4.25 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4.25 to 4.5 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4.5 to 5 hours

Thawed, stuffed cooking time:

Pounds	Hours
4 to 6 pounds (breast)	not usually applicable
6 to 8 pounds (breast)	2.5 to 3.5 hours
8 to 12 pounds	3 to 3.5 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3.5 to 4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	4 to 4.25 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4.25 to 4.75 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4.75 to 5.25 hours

It is safe to cook a turkey from the frozen state, but the cooking time will take at least 50 percent longer than recommended for a fully thawed turkey. To cook a frozen turkey, remove the bird's wrapping and any gravy packet, if present. Place the turkey on a rack in an oven pre-heated to at least 325°F. The time required for cooking will depend on the size of the bird. After the bird has thawed sufficiently in the oven (2–3 hours of cooking), take the turkey from the oven and remove the giblets and neck. It will take 4-1/2 to 5 hours to cook a 12- to 13-pound turkey from the frozen state; longer for larger birds.

“Always wash your hands, utensils, the sink, and anything else that comes in contact with raw turkey and its juices with soap and water,” Ingham says.

Ingham offers a few more optional cooking hints:

- Do not rinse turkeys, or other meat, before cooking; this only spreads germs. Use paper towels to gently remove pin feathers or blood.
- If your roasting pan does not have a lid, you may place a tent of heavy-duty aluminum foil over the turkey for the first 1 to 1.5 hours. This allows for maximum heat circulation, keeps the turkey moist and reduces oven splatter. To prevent over-browning, foil may also be placed over the turkey after it reaches the desired color.

For more information, visit http://www.foodsafety.gov/blog/thanksgiving_plan.html

For more information about food safety, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday at:

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

You can also e-mail mpholine.fsis@usda.gov or visit “Ask Karen,” the FSIS web-based automated response system available 24/7.