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## Let's Talk Turkey and Other Holiday Food Safety Issues

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When the holidays roll around, food safety sometimes takes a back seat in the minds of consumers who are cooking for larger gatherings than usual. Careful planning is required to allow enough time to safely thaw the bird and to cook it to a safe internal temperature of 180F. Fortunately, the USDA has several useful fact sheets to help us get through the season without incidence of foodborne illness. Below are some of the pointers addressed in "Let's Talk Turkey-A Consumer Guide to Safely Roasting a Turkey."

### Fresh Turkey

A good rule of thumb is to plan on about 1 pound of turkey per person. If buying fresh, purchase your turkey only 1 to 2 days before you plan to cook it. Keep it stored in the refrigerator until you're ready to cook it. Place it on a tray or in a pan to catch any juices that may leak. Avoid buying fresh pre-stuffed turkeys. If not handled properly, harmful bacteria that may be in the stuffing can multiply very quickly.

### Safe Thawing

There are 3 ways to thaw a turkey safely - in the refrigerator, in cold water or in the microwave oven.

If thawing in the *refrigerator*, allow approximately 24 hours for every 4 to 5 pounds. For a 20 lb. turkey that can mean 5 or 6 days to thaw completely. Keep the turkey in its original wrapper and place on a tray or in a pan to catch any juices that may leak. A thawed turkey can remain in the refrigerator for 1 to 2 days.

For *cold water thawing*, allow about 30 minutes per pound. First wrap your turkey securely, making sure the water is not able to leak through the wrapping. Submerge your wrapped turkey in cold tap water, changing the water every 30 minutes. Cook the turkey immediately after it is thawed. Do not refreeze.

For thawing in a *microwave oven*, check your owner's manual for the size turkey that will fit, the minutes per pound, and power level to use for thawing. Remove all outside wrapping. Place on a microwave-safe dish to catch any juices that may leak. Cook your turkey immediately. Do not refreeze or refrigerate the turkey after thawing in the microwave oven. Be sure and remove the giblets from the turkey cavities after thawing. Cook these separately.

### Roasting a Turkey

Set your oven temperature no lower than 325F. Place the turkey on a rack in a shallow roasting pan. For more even cooking, it is recommended to cook the stuffing outside the bird in a casserole. Refer to a roasting times chart for stuffed or unstuffed turkeys. Use a food thermometer to check that the following internal temperatures are reached as measured in several places:

- Stuffing: 165F.
- Whole turkey: 180F.
- Turkey breast only: 170F.

Even if your turkey has a pop-up temperature indicator, it's recommended that you also check the internal temperature of the turkey with a food thermometer. For quality, let the turkey "rest" for 20 minutes before carving to allow juices to set. Remove all stuffing from the turkey cavities. It is safe to cook a turkey from the frozen state, but the cooking time will take at least 50% longer than recommended for a fully thawed turkey.

### **Safe Handling/Storing of Leftovers**

- Always use soap and hot water to wash hands, utensils, the sink, and anything else that comes in contact with raw turkey and its juices.
- After the meal, discard any turkey, stuffing, and gravy left out at room temperature longer than 2 hours; 1 hour in temperatures above 90F.
- Divide leftovers into smaller portions. Refrigerate or freeze in covered shallow containers for quicker cooling. Use refrigerated turkey and stuffing within 3 to 4 days. Use gravy within 1 to 2 days. Use frozen leftovers within 2 to 6 months for best quality.
- When reheating turkey, use a food thermometer to check that the internal temperature reaches 165F.

### **Fact Sheets**

The Fact Sheet "Let's Talk Turkey-A Consumer Guide to Safely Roasting a Turkey" is available at: [http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact\\_Sheets/Lets\\_Talk\\_Turkey/index.asp](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Lets_Talk_Turkey/index.asp)

A variety of other fact sheets on seasonal safe food handling are available at: [www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact\\_Sheets/Seasonal\\_Food\\_Safety\\_Fact\\_Sheets/index.asp](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Seasonal_Food_Safety_Fact_Sheets/index.asp).

See *Count Down to a Safe Thanksgiving and Holiday or Party Buffets*

For more information, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline

The Hotline answers consumer food safety questions

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

1-800-256-7072 (TTY)

[mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov](mailto:mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov)

### **Source:**

Fact Sheet: "Let's Talk Turkey-A Consumer Guide to Safely Roasting a Turkey." USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service.

