



Holiday Leftovers

The holiday meal is over. You're ready to relax, sit down and visit with guests. But wait, doing so could result in some uninvited guests—bacteria that love to grow at room temperature!

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Holiday food safety guidelines are the same as at other times. Prevent food spoilage by temperature control, cleanliness, and time management.

Cleanliness Avoids Cross-contamination

Start with cleanliness to avoid cross-contamination. In the midst of festivities, it is easy to place the roasted turkey on the counter where the raw meat was a few hours before or to

pick up the spoon used to mix the bread, egg, and broth for the stuffing to stir a fruit salad. As a result, the cooked turkey and ready-to-eat fruit salad are contaminated with bacteria from the raw food ingredients prepared earlier. To avoid this cross contamination, remember to:

- Start with clean hands and be sure to wash them as you go from task to task in preparing foods.
- Work on a clean and sanitized counter or work surface.
- After cleaning with soap and water, spray counters with a sanitizing solution that you can make with one tablespoon liquid chlorine bleach in one-gallon water. Also, clean the sink with the sanitizing solution.

- Use clean platters, knives, spoons, or other utensils when handling the cooked food that you plan to wrap for storage.

Temperature Control

- Bacteria can grow quickly at temperatures between 40°F and 140°F. Quickly chilling the food after a meal reduces the risk of foodborne illness.
- Discard any turkey, stuffing, and gravy left at room temperature longer than two hours.
- Divide cooked foods into shallow containers for rapid cooling.
- Divide a large cut of meat or whole poultry into smaller pieces and wrap separately or place in shallow containers before refrigerating.
- Stir soups and stews to speed the release of heat.
- Deep pans can be placed in a sink of cold water to hasten cooling; replace the surrounding water as it absorbs heat from the food.
- Cover storage containers when the food is cooled. Placing warm food in the refrigerator does not harm the food, but it warms the refrigerator and foods already in the refrigerator.
- Avoid over filling the refrigerator. Allow space between foods in the refrigerator for cold air to circulate.

After the meal, remove any meat from the carcass, cut into small pieces and refrigerate or freeze immediately. Refrigerators should be 40° or below, and freezers should be 0°F or lower. Stuffing must be removed from the turkey carcass before it is refrigerated or frozen. The moisture content and the density of the stuffing is a good medium to support the growth of bacteria. Removing it from the turkey allows it to cool more quickly.

How Long to Keep Leftovers?

- Pies with a custard base such as pumpkin need to be refrigerated and used within 3 days.
- Fruit pies that do not contain eggs, evaporated milk, condensed milk, other milk products, sour cream, cream cheese, or custard should be loosely covered and kept at room temperature for up to 2 days. To keep a few extra days or if the pies are in a warmer climate, put fruit pies in the refrigerator.
- Cooked turkey, side dishes and gravy can be refrigerated for 3 to 4 days.
- Slices or pieces of plain turkey can be frozen for up to 4 months.
- Turkey covered with broth or gravy can be frozen for up to 6 months.
- Cooked poultry dishes, stuffing and gravy can be frozen 4 to 6 months.

- Freezer storage times are based on quality; if they remain frozen, they will be safe indefinitely.
- Date packages before storing, and always use the oldest first.

Use safe practices when reheating leftovers. Thaw frozen foods in the refrigerator; never defrost foods on the kitchen counter. Reheat to an internal temperature of 165°F checking the temperature with a calibrated thermometer.