

Turkey Talk

Thanksgiving and Christmas are almost upon us again. This is a time of the year when food and fellowship are at the top of everyone's list with emphasis on the food. Our traditional Thanksgiving meal of turkey and dressing is one we all look forward to (at least the first six times we eat it). Turkey is a healthy meat and one we all enjoy, but it needs to be handled with care as does all poultry.

The best way to thaw a turkey is in the refrigerator. Place the frozen bird in its original wrapper in the refrigerator (40 degrees F). Allow 24 hours per 5 pounds of turkey for thawing. After thawing, keep the turkey refrigerated for only 1-2 days. 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. Cook immediately after thawing.

Remember to clean up thoroughly after handling raw poultry. Cutting boards, counters, and hands need to be washed with hot soapy water and rinsed thoroughly. Don't forget to clean knives and other utensils used in handling raw poultry. As an extra precaution, add 1 tablespoon chlorine bleach to each gallon of water when cleaning up. If you have other food safety questions about poultry, call the USDA Meat and Poultry hotline at 1-800-MP Hotline (1-800-674-6854). Or send an email to mpholine.fsis@usda.gov.

Consult a time chart for cooking turkey. Basically an 8 to 12 pound turkey takes 3 to 3½ hours while a 14 to 18 pound turkey would take 4 to 4¼ hours. Use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of the turkey. All turkey meat, including any that remains pink, is safe to eat as soon as all parts of the turkey reach at least 160 degrees. Be sure to check the temperature in several locations, being sure to include the wing joint. One rule of thumb is that if the internal temperature in the thigh is 180 degrees, the rest of the turkey would be 160 degrees. Never partially cook turkey and finish cooking later. When the turkey is removed from the oven, let it stand 20 minutes before carving.

If poultry is stuffed, cook until the thermometer inserted into stuffing reaches at least 165 degrees F. It is safest to cook stuffing separately because stuffing inside a warm turkey is a breeding place for bacteria. To store leftover turkey, cut the turkey into small pieces. Refrigerate the stuffing and turkey separately in shallow containers within two hours of cooking. Use leftover turkey and stuffing within 3 to 4 days; gravy within 1 to 2 days; or freeze. Reheat thoroughly to a temperature of 165 degrees or until hot and steaming.

I would tell you not to eat too much, but at Thanksgiving that advice would be ignored. I hope that you and your family and friends have a great Thanksgiving.

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