

# Serving Turkey Safely

If you are like many Alaskans, you probably cook turkey only once or twice a year. But, no matter how often you cook a whole turkey, it must be done correctly to avoid food-borne illness. Proper handling of your turkey means paying attention to temperatures during thawing and cooking.

Harmful bacteria grow best in temperatures between 40°F and 140°F. The total time a roast turkey is held in the temperature danger zone should not be more than two hours.

## Preparing a turkey is easy

Remove the neck and giblets from the cavity before roasting — these can be cooked separately to make gravy. Wash your hands thoroughly after touching the turkey to avoid spreading germs in your kitchen.

Put your completely thawed turkey breast-side up in a large roasting pan with 2 to 2½-inch sides. If you have a rack for roasting, you can place it in the bottom of the pan, but this is not essential. If desired, place some quartered onion or apple or a small bunch of herbs inside the turkey. You may also coat the skin with some oil and salt and pepper.

To keep the turkey moist, add ½-1 cup of water to the pan and place the pan in the oven. Set the oven temperature to 325°F and check the turkey every couple of hours. An 8- to 12-pound turkey will need 2¾ to 3 hours before it is done.

Using a food thermometer, check several places on the turkey. The thermometer should register 165°F in the innermost part of the thigh, the innermost part of the wing and the thickest part of the breast.

If you have stuffed your turkey, the center of the stuffing should also be at 165°F. Remove the fully cooked turkey from the oven and let it rest for 15-20 minutes before carving.



**A note about stuffing:** Due to food safety concerns, cooking your stuffing in a casserole dish apart from the turkey is recommended. If you do choose to stuff your turkey, loosely fill the cavity immediately before placing the turkey in the oven. As instructed above, before removing the turkey from the oven, the center of the stuffing should be 165°F.

## Roasting bags

Turkeys can be roasted safely and more quickly in a roasting bag at 350°F. A defrosted, unstuffed 12-16 pound turkey will take approximately 2 to 2½ hours. Check that a safe internal temperature of 165°F has been reached at the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. Be cautious when opening or puncturing the bag to avoid burns.

For whole, unstuffed turkeys in oven roasting bags, cook at 350°F for the following approximate times:

- 8-12 pound turkey: 1 ½ to 2 hours
- 12-16 pound turkey: 2 to 2 ½ hours
- 16-20 pound turkey: 2 ½ to 3 hours
- 20-24 pound turkey: 3 to 3 ½ hours

Refer to the manufacturer-provided instructions on the oven bags for specific timetables. If you choose to stuff your turkey, add 30 minutes to the time.

## Hints and Safety Reminders

- When buying a turkey, allow 1 to 1½ pounds per person.
- Thaw turkey in the refrigerator or cold water. A thawed turkey may be stored in the refrigerator and cooked within one to two days. See table for details.
- When thawing turkey in **cold water**, wrap it securely so that water is not able to leak through; change the water every 30 minutes.
- When thawing turkey in a **microwave oven**, check owner's manual for the size turkey that will fit in your microwave oven, the minutes per pound and the power level to use for thawing. Remove all outside wrapping and any metal clips and place turkey in a microwave-safe dish to catch drips. Cook turkey immediately; do not refrigerate or refreeze.
- Turkey is done when the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast reach the **minimum** internal temperature of 165°F.
- If you stuff the turkey, stuffing should reach a **minimum** internal temperature of 165°. Stuff turkey immediately before cooking and remove stuffing as soon as cooking is completed. For optimum safety, cook stuffing outside of the bird, in a baking dish.
- Refrigerate all leftovers within two hours. Discard any turkey, stuffing or gravy left at room temperatures longer than two hours.
- Use refrigerated turkey and stuffing within three to four days. Use gravy within one to two days. Leftover turkey and gravy can also be frozen for longer term storage.

## HOW LONG TO THAW?

Weight in pounds	Thawing time, days in refrigerator	Thawing time, hours in cold water
4 - 12	1 - 3	2 - 6
12 - 16	3 - 4	6 - 8
16 - 20	4 - 5	8 - 10
20 - 24	5 - 6	10 - 12

## HOW LONG TO COOK?

(325°F oven temperature)

Weight in pounds	Unstuffed (hours)	Stuffed (hours)
4 - 8 (breast)	1½ - 2¼	
6 - 8 (breast)	2¼-3¼	
8 - 12	2¾ - 3	3 - 3½
12 - 14	3 - 3¾	3½ - 4
14 - 18	3¾ - 4¼	4 - 4¼
18 - 20	4¼ - 4½	4¼ - 4¾
20-24	4½ - 5	4¾ - 5¼

## References

*Let's Talk Turkey: A Consumer Guide to Safely Roasting a Turkey*, USDA Food Safety and Inspections Service, [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov)

[www.uaf.edu/ces](http://www.uaf.edu/ces) or 1-877-520-5211

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