

News Release

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Countdown to a Holiday Turkey

As Thanksgiving approaches, cooking the traditional turkey dinner gives rise to anxieties and questions. What kind of turkey should I buy? Should I buy a frozen turkey or a fresh one? How do I store my turkey?

"A few simple steps will not only ease your holiday fears," says Barbara Ingham, University of Wisconsin-Extension food scientist, "but will ensure a delicious and a safe meal for you, your family, and your friends."

The following suggestions, based on consumer information from the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service, may help you prepare your special Thanksgiving meal and countdown to the holiday.

Plan your menu several weeks before the holiday, Ingham says. Shopping early will ease the countdown tension for your Thanksgiving meal. Ask these questions to help plan your meal. Do you want a fresh or frozen turkey? Do you have enough space to store a frozen bird; if not, when should you purchase a turkey? What size bird do you need to buy?

"There is no appreciable difference between a fresh or frozen bird," says Ingham. "It's just a personal preference. If you choose to buy a frozen bird you may buy it at any time, but make sure you have enough storage space in your freezer. If you buy a fresh turkey, be sure you purchase it only one or two days before cooking. And, do not buy a prestuffed fresh turkey."

To determine what size turkey to buy, Ingham recommends using the following as a guide:

- Whole bird for 1 pound per person
- Boneless breast of turkey for 1/2 pound per person
- Breast of turkey for 3/4 pound per person
- Prestuffed frozen turkey for 1 1/4 pounds per person - keep frozen until ready to cook.

To thaw a turkey in the refrigerator, place the frozen bird in its original wrapper in the refrigerator (40 °F). Allow approximately 24 hours for every five pounds of turkey. After thawing, keep the turkey refrigerated for only one or two days, or use this chart.

Size of Turkey	Thawing Time in the Refrigerator
8 to12 pounds	1 to 2 days
12 to16 pounds	2 to 3 days
16 to 20 pounds	3 to 4 days
20 to 24 pounds	4 to 5 days

If you forget to thaw the turkey or don't have room in the refrigerator for thawing, don't panic, says Ingham. To thaw a turkey in cold water, submerge the turkey in the water and change the water every 30 minutes. Allow about 30 minutes defrosting time per pound of turkey. The following times are suggested for thawing turkey in water.

Size of Turkey	Hours to Defrost
8 to 12 pounds	4 to 6 hours
12 to 16 pounds	6 to 8 hours
16 to 20 pounds	8 to 10 hours
20 to 24 pounds	10 to 12 hours

Thawing a turkey in the microwave is safe, according to Ingham, if the turkey is not too large. Check the manufacturer's instructions for the size turkey that will fit into your oven, the minutes per pound, and the power level to use for thawing. Cook immediately after thawing.

"Preparation can begin the day before Thanksgiving," says Ingham. "Make sure you have all the ingredients and equipment you will need, including a roasting pan large enough to hold your turkey and a meat thermometer. Rinse the turkey in cold water the night before and re-wrap for roasting the next day if you wish."

Wet and dry stuffing ingredients can be prepared ahead of time and refrigerated separately, or this may be done on Thanksgiving Day. Mix the ingredients just before placing the stuffing inside the turkey cavity or into a casserole dish.

Preparations continue on Thanksgiving Day. If you choose to stuff your turkey, stuff loosely. The stuffing should be moist, not dry, since heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment. Place stuffed turkey in the oven immediately. You may also cook the stuffing outside the bird in a casserole. The internal temperature of the turkey should be at 165 degrees whether the stuffing is cooked inside the bird or in a separate dish.

Judging cooking time for your turkey will be easier if the following chart is used. The times listed are for a fresh or thawed turkey in an oven at 325 °F. These times are approximate.

Unstuffed

Size of Turkey	Cooking Time
8 to 12 pounds	2 3/4 to 3 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 to 3 3/4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	3 3/4 to 4 1/4 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4 1/4 to 4 1/2 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4 1/2 to 5 hours

Stuffed

Size of Turkey	Cooking Time
8 to 12 pounds	3 to 3 1/2 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 1/2 to 4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	4 to 4 1/4 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4 1/4 to 4 3/4 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4 3/4 to 5 1/4 hours

Use a meat thermometer to check the internal temperature of the turkey, Ingham says. When the temperature (as measured in the thigh) has reached 180 °F, the meat has reached a safe temperature and is safe to eat. Check the temperature in several locations, being sure to include the wing joint. All turkey meat, including any that remains pink, is safe to eat as soon as all parts reach at least 160 °F. Remember, the stuffing should reach 165 °F, whether cooked inside the bird or in a separate dish.

When the turkey is removed from the oven, let it stand for 20 minutes. Then, remove the stuffing and carve the turkey.

To store leftovers, Ingham recommends that you cut the turkey into small pieces, then refrigerate the stuffing and turkey separately in shallow containers within one hour of cooking. Use the leftover turkey and stuffing within three or four days, and gravy within one to two days, or freeze these foods. Reheat thoroughly to a temperature of 165 °F or until hot and steaming.

For additional food safety information about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854); for the hearing-impaired: (TTY) 1-800-256-7072. The Hotline is staffed by food safety experts weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time. Food safety recordings can be heard 24 hours a day using a touch-tone phone. Information is also available from the FSIS Web site at <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>.

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