



Talking Turkey

Be prepared! Before purchasing your turkey, make ample space in your refrigerator, moving shelves if necessary.

Fresh or frozen? There is no quality difference between a fresh or frozen turkey although fresh turkeys have shorter shelf lives. By purchasing a frozen turkey, you can get the turkey in advance and take advantage of special sales. Fresh turkeys provide convenience because they do not require thawing.

Fresh Turkeys

Allow 1 pound of turkey per person.

Buy 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.

Do not buy fresh pre-stuffed turkeys. If not handled properly, any harmful bacteria that may be in the stuffing can multiply very quickly.

Frozen Turkeys

Allow 1 pound of turkey per person.

Keep frozen until you're ready to thaw it.

See "Thawing Your Turkey" for thawing instructions.

Frozen Pre-Stuffed Turkeys

USDA recommends only buying frozen pre-stuffed turkeys that display the USDA or State mark of inspection on the packaging. These turkeys are safe because they have been processed under controlled conditions.

DO NOT THAW before cooking. Cook from the frozen state. Follow package directions for proper handling and cooking. Allow 1¼ pounds of turkey per person.

When should I buy it? Keep in mind that a whole turkey takes about 24 hours per four to five pounds to thaw in the refrigerator. (For example: A 15-pound frozen bird will take 3 to 4 full days to thaw in the refrigerator.) Ideally, purchase your frozen turkey as far in advance as necessary to safely thaw it in the refrigerator. If buying a fresh turkey, purchase it only 1 to 2 days before the meal and keep it refrigerated.

Thawing and Handling

Always wash hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before and after handling the turkey.

There are three ways to thaw your turkey safely — in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave oven.

In the Refrigerator (40 °F or below)

Allow approximately 24 hours for every 4 to 5 pounds

4 to 12 pounds = 1 to 3 day

12 to 16 pounds = 3 to 4 days

16 to 20 pounds = 4 to 5 days

20 to 24 pounds = 5 to 6 day

Keep the turkey in its original wrapper. Place it 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. If necessary, a turkey that has been properly thawed in the refrigerator may be refrozen. Thawing your turkey in the refrigerator is the safest method and will result in the best finished product.

In Cold Water

Allow approximately 30 minutes per pound

4 to 12 pounds = 2 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

Wrap your turkey securely, making sure the water is not able to leak through the wrapping. Submerge your wrapped turkey in cold tap water. Change the water every 30 minutes. Cook the turkey immediately after it is thawed. Do not refreeze.

In the Microwave Oven

Check your owner's manual for the size turkey that will fit in your microwave oven, 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 your turkey after thawing in the microwave oven.

REMINDER: Remove the giblets from the turkey cavities after thawing. Cook separately.

Cooking Time and Temperature

Time to cook. There are several methods for cooking your turkey. The single most important thing to know, no matter the cooking method, is that the turkey must be cooked to the proper internal temperature as measured with a food thermometer, 165 °F. A stuffed turkey will take additional time to cook.

Stuff safely. Stuffing should be prepared and stuffed into the turkey immediately before it's placed in the oven. Mix the wet and dry ingredients for the stuffing separately and combine just before using. Stuff the turkey loosely, about 3/4 cup stuffing per pound of turkey. Bake any extra stuffing in a greased casserole dish. Cooked inside or outside the bird, all stuffing and dressing recipes must be cooked to a minimum temperature of 165 °F. (For optimum safety and more even cooking, it's recommended to cook your stuffing in a casserole dish.) Take the temperature! Insert a meat thermometer into the thickest part of the thigh, not touching bone. Cook to a minimum internal temperature of 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer. Check the internal temperature in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. For reasons of personal preference, cook turkey to higher temperatures but not to exceed 170 °F in the breast and 180 °F in the thigh. (If the turkey is done and the stuffing is not yet 165 °F, remove the stuffing from the turkey and place it in a greased casserole dish to continue cooking to temperature.)

Safe carving and serving

It's best to let the turkey rest for 20 minutes before carving to allow the juices to set, so the turkey will carve more easily. Use a clean cutting board that has a well to catch juices. Remove all stuffing from the turkey cavity. Make sure your knife is sharp before you start carving. Do not leave any extra turkey, stuffing or other leftovers out for more than two hours.

Storing leftovers safely

Remove the stuffing and carve the extra turkey meat from the bones. Within two hours, store leftover turkey in shallow containers and put in the refrigerator or the freezer. Use cooked leftover turkey, stuffing and gravy within 3-4 days. Cooked turkey keeps for 3-4 months in the freezer. When using leftovers, reheat the foods thoroughly to 165 °F or until hot and steaming; bring gravy to a boil before serving.