



NEWS RELEASE

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Holiday Turkey Prep & Safety

If you like the idea of serving turkey with all the trimmings to your holiday guests but aren't looking forward to getting up at the crack of dawn to get the bird in the oven, don't despair. There are a number of shortcuts you can take in preparing your holiday turkey that are safe and can decrease the time spent in preparation.

First, when shopping for your turkey, decide on the kind of turkey you want before you go to the store. Buy frozen turkey early to get the size you want. Keep it frozen at zero degrees F until ready to thaw for use. To save the time and effort required to thaw a turkey, order a fresh bird ahead of time and pick it up one or two days before you'll be cooking it.

If you're feeding a small crowd, you can decrease the cooking time required by purchasing a frozen turkey roll or your favorite turkey parts. Turkey legs, breasts and thighs, as well ready-to-grill turkey fillets, are all sold separately. For the ultimate in shortcuts, consider buying the bird pre-cooked. Do this, however, only if you plan to serve the bird immediately.

One shortcut NOT to take is to buy a pre-stuffed, raw bird. When a turkey is stuffed, incubator-like conditions develop in the cavity of the turkey that promote bacterial growth. Stuffing, if added at all, should be placed in the turkey just prior to cooking.

If you have space in your refrigerator and have planned ahead, the easiest way to thaw your turkey is in the refrigerator. Plan on a day of thawing time per 5 pounds of bird, which translates to four days for a 20-pound turkey. One way to speed the thawing process is to submerge the turkey in cold water. However, you still need to allow 30 minutes per pound of turkey being thawed for the cold-water method and need to change the water every 30 minutes. For a 20-pound bird, we're talking 10 hours and 20 water changes.

If your bird is small enough to fit in your microwave oven, you may want to consider microwave thawing by following recommendations in your owner's manual. Because microwave thawing often results in a warm to partially cooked turkey exterior, it's important to cook the bird immediately after thawing. One shortcut NOT to take is to thaw the bird on the kitchen counter. This method promotes the growth of bacteria on the surface of the bird as the inside of the turkey thaws.

While you are thawing your bird, check to see that you have all the ingredients and equipment you'll need to prepare your holiday meal. Make sure your roasting pan is large enough to hold your turkey and that you have a meat thermometer that works.

Here are some ways to save time during the actual cooking process:

- Use a microwave oven to partially or completely cook the bird.
- Cook the bird and stuffing separately. Separate cooking can save up to an hour of cooking time and is a much safer way to cook stuffing.
- Cook in an oven cooking bag or covered roaster. This can reduce the cooking time by a half-hour or so.

Don't even think about partially cooking the turkey the night before, then finishing it up on the day of the big event. This is a recipe for bacterial survival and growth. Also, it's not a good idea to cook the bird all night at a low oven setting. Cooking at any temperature under 300 degrees F allows the bird to sit in the temperature danger zone for too many hours. For safety's sake, cook at 325 degrees F until a thermometer inserted in the thickest part of the thigh reads 180 degrees F.

Serving a large turkey dinner requires forethought. Plan ahead and put food out just before you're ready to eat. If the serving time is long, plan to use hot trays or chafing dishes to keep hot foods hot.

After your holiday meal, play it safe by slicing or stripping the meat from the carcass and refrigerating the stuffing and turkey separately in shallow containers. Leftover turkey will keep in the refrigerator for three or four days or in the freezer for three to four months. Refrigerated stuffing and gravy should be used within one to two days.

Source: Dell Rae Moellenberg, Colorado State University, Cooperative Extension