

factsheet

Food Safety and Holiday Turkey



When holiday festivities include cooking a turkey dinner, many questions may follow: How do I thaw or store my turkey? How do I know if it is properly cooked? What do I do with leftovers? Following these safe food-handling tips from the food safety specialists at the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture will answer these questions and ensure a safe and nutritious meal.

Buying a Turkey

Turkey can be purchased either fresh or frozen. Either can provide a wonderful holiday dinner.

- A frozen turkey may be purchased at any time and can be stored in your freezer for up to one year.
- A fresh turkey should be purchased one to two days before cooking.
- When purchasing a turkey (or other raw meat) select it last, and keep it separated from other foods to prevent its juices from running and cross contaminating other foods.

Thawing a Turkey

Thawing turkey properly is very important to ensure food safety. Proper thawing prevents bacteria on the turkey from increasing to such a level that cooking may not effectively destroy them. These are three recommended methods to defrost turkeys:

- **In the refrigerator** — This is a safe, slow method and you must plan ahead. It takes approximately 24 hours for every five pounds of turkey to thaw. The turkey should be placed on a large platter to prevent juices from dripping on to other foods, and placed on the lowest shelf in the refrigerator.
- **Submerged in cold water** — The turkey should be wrapped in a leak-proof plastic bag. Change the water every 30 minutes to ensure it stays cold. It takes approximately 30 minutes per pound to thaw.

- **In a microwave** — The turkey should be cooked immediately after thawing. Check the manufacturer's instructions for the minutes per pound and power level to use for thawing.

Preparation for Roasting

Proper handling of the raw turkey during preparation for cooking is important to reduce the risk of cross contamination and prevent the likelihood of food-borne illness.

- Proper hand washing should be practiced before and after handling raw turkey.
- If the turkey has been washed or thawed in a sink, the sink must be cleaned with soap and water and sanitized using 1 ½ teaspoons of household bleach per litre of water.
- It is preferable to cook stuffing outside the turkey. However, if cooking it in the turkey, it should be moist and loosely placed (¾ cup per pound) in the cavity. The turkey should be stuffed just before putting it into the oven.
- After placing the turkey in the oven, thoroughly clean and sanitize all utensils and work surfaces that were in contact with the raw turkey.

Cooking the Turkey

Proper cooking of the turkey to safe temperatures will ensure the destruction of bacteria that could cause a food-borne illness.

- The turkey should be completely thawed before cooking.

- Set the oven temperature to no less than 164°C (325°F). Never put the turkey in the oven at a lower temperature to slow cook overnight.
- A meat thermometer should be used to check the internal temperature of the turkey to ensure it is done. The temperature in the thigh should reach 82°C (180°F) or 74°C (165°F) in the stuffing.
- When properly cooked, the juices should run clear and have no trace of pink.
- When turkey is cooked to a safe temperature of 82°C (180°F), as checked by a meat thermometer, a slight pink color may still exist in the meat. This is caused by such things as oven gases and the age of the turkey but the meat is safe to eat.

Approximate Cooking Times

The following are cooking times for fresh or completely thawed turkeys in a 164°C. (325°F) oven. These times should be used together with a meat thermometer.

- 8 – 12 pounds: 2¾ – 3 hours (unstuffed)
3 – 3½ hours (stuffed)
- 12 – 14 pounds: 3 – 3¾ hours (unstuffed)
3½ – 4 hours (stuffed)
- 14 – 18 pounds: 3¾ – 4¼ hours (unstuffed)
4 – 4½ hours (stuffed)
- 18 – 20 pounds: 4¼ – 4½ hours (unstuffed)
4¼ – 4¾ hours (stuffed)

Leftovers

While it is tempting to leave turkey out for snacking after a meal, this practice is dangerous and can lead to foodborne illness. Inadequate reheating of leftovers can also contribute to foodborne illness.

- Cut the turkey into small pieces, refrigerate the turkey and stuffing separately in shallow containers within two hours of cooking.
- Use leftover turkey and stuffing within three to four days; gravy within one to two days.
- Reheat turkey, stuffing and gravy thoroughly to a temperature of 74°C (165°F) or until hot and steaming.
- Leftovers may be frozen. Cooked turkey can be frozen up to four months; gravy and stuffing for one month.
- Soups and casseroles using leftover turkey should be made within three to four days, and may be kept frozen for four to six months.

For further information on food safety visit the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture Food Safety website at <http://www.gov.ns.ca/agri/foodsafety/>

