

Stay Food Safe this Thanksgiving Holiday

WASHINGTON, November 7, 2022 – Keep your stomach full of turkey and free from foodborne illness this Thanksgiving holiday. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reminds us all that it's important to remember the steps to food safety during America's biggest meal.

"While the four steps to food safety — clean, separate, cook and chill — are important every day and at every meal, they are particularly significant on Thanksgiving," said USDA Deputy Under Secretary Sandra Eskin. "There will likely be many guests and many delicious dishes at your holiday table, but you don't want to invite any foodborne pathogens. Follow those four steps — in particular remember to use a food thermometer — and your Thanksgiving dinner will be a safe one."

Keep your Thanksgiving celebration food safe by following the tips below.

Clean and Sanitize

Handwashing is the first step to avoiding foodborne illness. Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water before, during, and after handling food. In a recent [study](#), 97 percent of participants in a USDA test kitchen failed to wash their hands properly. Make sure to follow these handwashing steps:

- Wet your hands with clean, running water.
- Lather your fingers with soap.
- Scrub soapy hands and fingers thoroughly for at least 20 seconds. Rinse your hands under clean, running water.
- Dry hands off with a clean towel or air dry them.

Clean and sanitize any surfaces that have touched raw turkey and its juices and will later touch food such as kitchen counters, sinks, stoves, tabletops, etc.

Avoid Cross-Contamination

Cross-contamination is the spread of bacteria from raw meat and poultry onto ready-to-eat food, surfaces, and utensils. One way to avoid this is by using separate cutting boards — one for raw meat and poultry, and another for fruits and vegetables. [Our recent study](#) found that sinks are the most contaminated areas of the kitchen. USDA recommends against washing your raw poultry due to the risk of splashing bacteria throughout your kitchen. Clean and sanitize any areas that will come into contact with the turkey before and after cooking.

Thaw the Turkey Safely

Never thaw your turkey in hot water or leave it on a countertop. There are three ways to safely thaw a turkey: in the refrigerator, in cold water and in the microwave.

- Refrigerator thawing: Turkey can be safely thawed in a refrigerator to allow for slow and safe thawing. When thawing in a refrigerator, allow roughly 24 hours for every four to five pounds of turkey. After thawing, a turkey is safe in a refrigerator for one to two days.
- Cold water thawing: The cold water thawing method will thaw your turkey faster but will require more attention. When thawing in a cold-water bath, allow 30 minutes per pound and submerge the turkey in its original wrapping to avoid cross-contamination. Change the water every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed. The turkey must be cooked immediately after thawing.

- Microwave thawing: To thaw a turkey that fits in the microwave, follow manufacturer's recommendations. Cook it immediately after thawing because some areas of the food may become warm and begin to cook during the thawing process, bringing the food to the "[Danger Zone](#)."

It's safe to cook a completely frozen turkey; however, it will take at least 50 percent longer to fully cook.

Cook Thoroughly

Your turkey is safe to eat once it reaches an internal temperature of 165 F. Insert a food thermometer into the thickest part of the breast, the innermost part of the wing and the innermost part of the thigh to check its internal temperature. USDA recommends using a food thermometer even if the turkey has a pop-up temperature indicator to ensure it has reached 165 F in the three previously stated places.

Stuffing your Turkey

USDA recommends against stuffing your turkey since this often leads to bacteria growth. However, if you plan to stuff your turkey, follow these steps:

- Prepare the wet and dry ingredients for the stuffing separately from each other and refrigerate until ready to use. Mix wet and dry ingredients just before filling the bird's cavity.
- Do not stuff whole poultry and leave in the refrigerator before cooking.
- Stuff the turkey loosely — about 3/4 cup of stuffing per pound.
- Immediately place the stuffed, raw turkey in an oven set no lower than 325 F.
- A stuffed turkey will take longer to cook. Once it has finished cooking, place a food thermometer in the center of the stuffing to ensure it has reached a safe internal temperature of 165 F.
- Let the cooked turkey stand 20 minutes before removing the stuffing.

For more information on turkey stuffing, visit [Turkey Basics: Stuffing](#).

The Two-Hour Rule

Don't leave your food sitting out too long! Refrigerate all perishable foods sitting out at room temperature within two hours of being cooked, or one hour if the temperature is 90 F or above. After two hours, perishable food will enter the "[Danger Zone](#)" (between 40 F and 140 F), which is where bacteria can multiply quickly and cause the food to become unsafe. Discard all foods that have been left out for more than two hours. Remember the rule — keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold.

- Transporting hot foods — Wrap dishes in insulated containers to keep their temperature above 140 F.
- Transporting cold foods — Place items in a cooler with ice or gel packs to keep them at or below 40 F.

When serving food to groups, keep hot food hot and keep cold food cold by using chafing dishes or crock pots and ice trays. Hot items should remain above 140 F and cold items should remain below 40 F.

Leftovers

Store leftovers in small shallow containers and put them in the refrigerator. Thanksgiving leftovers are safe to eat up to four days in the refrigerator. In the freezer, leftovers are safely frozen indefinitely but will keep best quality from two to six months.

Resources

For Thanksgiving food safety questions, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854), email MPHotline@usda.gov or chat live at ask.usda.gov from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday.

Do you have any last-minute turkey day questions? The Meat and Poultry Hotline will be open on Thanksgiving Day from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. EST.

Check out the [USDA FoodKeeper App](#), which helps to reduce food waste by providing food and beverage storage information. Access news releases and other information at USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service's (FSIS) website at www.fsis.usda.gov/newsroom. Follow FSIS on Twitter at twitter.com/usdafoodsafety or in Spanish at: twitter.com/usdafoodsafety_es.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. In the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production; fairer markets for all producers; ensuring access to safe, healthy, and nutritious food in all communities; building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices; making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America; and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit www.usda.gov.