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Preparing Your Thanksgiving Turkey

As the fall season has arrived, it won't be long before we are thinking about Thanksgiving and cooking a holiday turkey. The Thanksgiving meal may be the largest that some cooks prepare each year and getting it just right may bring a fair amount of pressure. Below are some common questions and answers to consider to make sure your Thanksgiving turkey is both delicious and safe to serve.

What size of turkey should I buy? You will want to buy 1 pound of turkey per person as this will allow for ample portions and leftovers.

How far in advance can I buy a fresh turkey? If you want to buy a fresh turkey, plan on purchasing the turkey only 1 to 2 days before you plan to cook it. Some grocery stores will let you reserve a fresh turkey.

How long does it take to thaw a frozen turkey? The safest method for thawing a turkey is to place it in its original wrapper in the refrigerator because it will defrost at a consistent and safe temperature. It is important to use a refrigerator thermometer to check to make sure your refrigerator is set at 40 degrees Fahrenheit or below. It will take about 24 hours for every 4 to 5 pounds of weight for a turkey to thaw in the refrigerator. A twenty-pound turkey, for example, will take approximately 4 to 5 days to thaw.

If you forget to thaw the turkey or don't have enough room in the refrigerator, you can submerge the frozen turkey in cold water and change the water every 30 minutes. It will take

about 30 minutes of defrosting time for per pound of turkey. A turkey weighing between 12 and 16 pounds, for example, will take approximately 6 to 8 hours to defrost.

Is it safe to cook a turkey from the frozen state? Yes. The cooking time will take at least 50% longer than recommended for a fully thawed turkey. You will want to remember to remove the giblet packages during the cooking time. These packages can be carefully removed with tongs or a fork.

How long does it take to roast my turkey? When roasting a turkey, you will want to set your oven temperature at 325 degrees Fahrenheit and place the turkey on a rack in a shallow roasting pan. The timetables listed below give approximate times for how long to cook your turkey. Remember to always use a food thermometer to determine if your turkey and stuffing has reached an safe internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

| Unstuffed Turkey | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| 4 to 8 pounds (breast) | 1½ to 3¼ hours |
| 8 to 12 pounds | 2¾ to 3 hours |
| 12 to 14 pounds | 3 to 3¾ hours |
| 14 to 18 pounds | 3¾ to 4¼ hours |
| 18 to 20 pounds | 4¼ to 4½ hours |
| 20 to 24 pounds | 4½ to 5 hours |

| Stuffed Turkey | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 4 to 6 pounds (breast) | Not usually applicable |
| 6 to 8 pounds (breast) | 2½ to 3½ hours |
| 8 to 12 pounds | 3 to 3½ hours |
| 12 to 14 pounds | 3½ to 4 hours |
| 14 to 18 pounds | 4 to 4½ hours |
| 18 to 20 pounds | 4¼ to 4¾ hours |
| 20 to 24 pounds | 4¾ to 5¼ hours |

If you choose to stuff your turkey, the ingredients can be prepared ahead of time. You will, however, want to keep wet and dry ingredients separate and plan to mix them just before filling the turkey cavities. Fill the cavities loosely and cook the turkey immediately. Remember to use a food thermometer to make sure the center of the stuffing reaches a minimum internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

How do I tell when the turkey is done? A turkey is safely cooked when it reaches a minimum internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit. It is important to check the internal temperature with a meat thermometer in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. Turkey meat, including any that remains pink, is safe to eat as soon as all three parts reach 165 degrees Fahrenheit. For quality purposes, let the turkey stand for 20 minutes before carving to allow juices to set. The turkey will carve more easily.

If a turkey has a “pop-up” temperature indicator, do I still need to use a thermometer? If your turkey has a “pop-up” temperature indicator, it is recommended that you also check the internal temperature of the turkey in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast with a food thermometer. The minimum internal temperature should reach 165 degrees Fahrenheit for safety.

What is the best way to store leftovers? The best way to store leftovers is to cut the turkey into smaller pieces. You will also want to refrigerate the stuffing and turkey separately in shallow containers within two hours of cooking. Leftover turkey and stuffing should be used within 3-4 days and reheated to a temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

Can I call the Meat and Poultry Hotline on Thanksgiving Day? Yes, the hotline will be staffed from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Eastern Time on Thanksgiving Day by calling 1.888.674.6854. The hotline is open to receive food safety questions during regular business hours, Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Eastern Time. You can also ask questions at AskKaren.gov, which is available 24 hours a day.

Source: Let's Talk Turkey – A Consumer Guide to Safely Roasting a Turkey, USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service