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## Healthy Holidays Focus on Turkey

The holidays are upon us, and as we prepare for our family and friends and all those delicious holiday meals, we need to keep safe food handling procedures in mind. Thanksgiving is a time to be thankful for all our blessings. Traditionally, Americans serve a meal with family favorites and a turkey is most often at the center of the table.

The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service has many resources available related to safely handling your turkey while preparing, serving and storing leftovers. Let's start with preparing your turkey for roasting.

The most common ways to purchase a turkey are fresh or frozen. Fresh turkeys can be stored in the refrigerator for 1-2 days before cooking and should be prepared and served after no more than two days. Frozen turkeys should be thawed one of three ways: in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave oven. The most common thawing method is in the refrigerator.

Thawing a turkey in the refrigerator depends on bird size. The chart includes the size of the bird and the length of time needed to thaw in a refrigerator set at 40<sup>0</sup> or below.

4 to 12 pounds	1 to 3 days
12 to 16 pounds	3 to 4 days
16 to 20 pounds	4 to 5 days
20 to 24 pounds	5 to 6 days

Thawing in cold water will be faster but more care must be taken. The turkey should be securely wrapped so no water seeps through to the bird. Cold water must be used and changed every 30 minutes and the turkey must be cooked immediately after it is thawed. During this process the meat has a greater chance of being mishandled and bacterial growth may begin to occur. The time needed to complete the thawing process may range from 2 hours for a 4-pound bird to

twelve hours for a twenty-four-pound bird. Not many people want to be up for twelve hours thawing their turkey before beginning the cooking process.

The last method is to thaw using the microwave oven. This method requires the turkey to be cooked as soon as it is thawed, as the thawing process may have caused cooking to begin. A turkey thawed using this method should not be refrozen or stored before cooking begins. Follow microwave oven directions, unwrap the turkey and place in a microwave-safe dish to catch any juices.

Now that your turkey is thawed, there are a few guidelines to follow to safely cook your turkey.

- Use an oven set no lower than 325<sup>0</sup>F to assure proper cooking temperature
- Stuffing the turkey is not recommended, place stuffing in a casserole dish to bake
- Tuck wing tips
- Add ½ cup water to the shallow pan you use for baking
- Drape bird with aluminum foil to prevent over browning
- When using an oven cooking bag, follow manufacturer's directions
- Always wash hands, utensils, sink and anything else that may come into contact with raw poultry or it's juices with soap and water to prevent cross contamination
- Cook to an internal temperature of 165<sup>0</sup> using a meat thermometer to test for accuracy
- Let turkey stand for twenty minutes after removing from oven for easier carving

When serving your meal, only leave at room temperature for 2 hours. Proper storage of leftovers should include small portions in containers that are shallow to allow quicker cooling. Store turkey for 3 to 4 days in the refrigerator and 2 to 6 months in freezer for best quality.

Following these simple steps, using caution when handling raw poultry, properly cooking your turkey, and safely storing leftovers should allow you to have a safe and enjoyable holiday meal with your family and friends.

More information about cooking your turkey may be obtained using the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service website at: [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov)

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