



## Let's Talk Turkey

With the Thanksgiving holiday approaching, it's a good time to consider some basic tips from the USDA for safely preparing a holiday turkey.

### Will your turkey be fresh or frozen?

For fresh turkeys, allow one pound of turkey per person. Buy your turkey only one to two days before you plan to cook it, and keep it stored in the refrigerator until you are ready to place it in the oven. Place a fresh turkey in a pan or on a tray to catch any juices that may leak. Do not buy fresh pre-stuffed turkeys. For frozen turkeys, allow one pound turkey per person. Keep frozen until ready to thaw.

### What is the best way to thaw a turkey?

There are three ways to safely thaw your turkey: in the refrigerator, in cold water in the sink, or in a microwave oven. The recommendations for thawing are:

Size of turkey	Refrigerator (40°F or below) Thaw on a tray or in a pan to prevent drips. Turkey may be stored in the refrigerator for 1 to 2 days before cooking.	In Cold Water Thaw wrapped securely, making sure the water is not able to leak through the wrapping. Keep turkey submerged. Change water every 30 minutes. Cook immediately after thawing. Do not refreeze.
4 to 12 pounds	1 to 3 days	2 to 6 hours
12 to 16 pounds	3 to 4 days	6 to 8 hours
16 to 20 pounds	4 to 5 days	8 to 10 hours
20 to 24 pounds	5 to 6 days	10 to 12 hours

Check your owner's manual to thaw a turkey in your microwave oven. Once thawed, cook immediately; do not refreeze or refrigerate a turkey after microwave thawing.

### How to roast your holiday bird?

Set your oven temperature no lower than 325°F. Place the turkey or turkey breast on a rack in a shallow roasting pan. For more even cooking, it is recommended you cook your stuffing outside the bird in a casserole dish. If you choose to stuff your turkey, the ingredients can be prepared ahead of time; however, the stuffing should not be placed into the bird until just before cooking starts. Keep wet and dry ingredients separate. Chill all of the wet ingredients (butter/margarine, cooked celery and onions, broth, etc.). Mix wet and dry ingredients just before filling the turkey cavities. Fill the cavities loosely. Cook the turkey immediately.

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**When is it done?** Here are the key temperatures for roasting a holiday turkey:

- Cook a whole turkey, or a turkey breast, to 165 °F. To check for doneness in a whole turkey, insert a food thermometer in the thickest part of the inner thigh without touching the bone. Check for doneness in a turkey breast by inserting a food thermometer in the thickest part of the breast. Note: Turkey meat will be safely cooked when the internal temperature reaches 165°F, however, the meat may still be slightly pink. Some individuals will prefer cooking turkey to a higher temperature (whole turkey to 180°F or breast meat to 170°F) for meat that is more ‘well done.’
- Stuffing must also reach 165 °F; the turkey is often ‘over done’ by the time the stuffing reaches a safe temperature.
- Research has shown that you should not rely on a “pop-up” temperature indicator to ensure doneness. Use a thermometer instead.
- For quality, let the turkey stand for 20 minutes before carving to allow juices to set. The turkey will carve more easily.

**Timetables for Turkey Roasting** (325°F oven temperature)

Use the timetables below to determine how long to cook your turkey. These times are approximate. Always use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of your turkey and stuffing.

**Thawed, Unstuffed  
Cooking Time**

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

**Thawed, Stuffed  
Cooking Time**

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

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## **It is safe to cook a turkey from the frozen state.**

The cooking time will take **at least 50% longer** than recommended for a fully thawed turkey. To cook a turkey from the frozen state, remove the wrapping from the turkey and follow the manufacturer's directions to remove a gravy packet, if present. Place the turkey on a rack in a pre-heated oven at least 325°F. The time required for cooking will depend on the size of the bird. A 12 to 13 pound bird will take approximately five hours to cook from the frozen state; a larger bird will take longer. The giblets can be removed after about three hours, when the turkey is partially thawed. The plastic piece that holds the legs in place is heat stable and does not need to be removed for cooking. Cook the turkey to 165°F, or higher. To check for doneness, insert a food thermometer in the thickest part of the inner thigh without touching the bone.

## **Here are some optional cooking hints:**

- 1) Do not rinse turkeys, or other meat, before cooking; this only spreads germs. Use paper towels to gently remove pin feathers or coagulated blood, if desired.
- 2) Add ½ cup of water to the bottom of the pan to keep your bird moist and to make cleanup easier.
- 3) If your roasting pan does not have a lid, you may place a tent of heavy-duty aluminum foil over the turkey for the first 1 to 1½ hours. This allows for maximum heat circulation, keeps the turkey moist, and reduces oven splatter. To prevent over-browning, foil may also be placed over the turkey after it reaches the desired color.

For last-minute information on cooking your holiday feast, call the Meat and Poultry Hotline, 1-888-674-6854 or log onto [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov)

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