



Food Safety Tips for Preparing a Holiday Turkey

Revised by **Carla L. Schwan**, Extension food safety specialist

Original manuscript prepared by **Elizabeth Andress**, former Extension food safety specialist



UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
EXTENSION

SAFE THAWING

The USDA recommends three ways to defrost turkeys: in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave. Because bacteria can multiply rapidly at room temperature, **never defrost a turkey on the counter!**

Refrigerator Thawing

Refrigerator thawing is the safest method to thaw food, including a turkey. Plan ahead for slow thawing in the refrigerator. For every 4 to 5 lb of turkey allow approximately 24 hr of thawing time in a refrigerator set at 40 °F. Place the turkey in a container to catch any juices that may leak. After thawing, keep the turkey refrigerated for only 1–2 days. Use the following chart to help you prepare accordingly to have a food-safe holiday.

Turkey size	Thawing time in the refrigerator
4 to 12 lb	1 to 3 days
12 to 16 lb	3 to 4 days
16 to 20 lb	4 to 5 days
20 to 24 lb	5 to 6 days

Cold Water Thawing

If you forget to thaw the turkey or don't have room in the refrigerator for thawing, don't panic. For faster thawing, submerge the bird or cut-up parts in cold water in its airtight packaging or in a leak-proof bag. Allow about 30 min of defrosting time per pound of turkey. Change the water every 30 min to be sure it stays cold—and set a timer to help you to remember to change the water.

The cold water slows the multiplication of bacteria in the thawed parts of the bird

while the inner parts are still thawing. The following times are suggested for thawing a turkey in water. Turkeys thawed by the cold-water method should be **cooked immediately**.

Turkey size	Thawing time in cold water
4 to 12 lb	2 to 6 hr
12 to 16 lb	6 to 8 hr
16 to 20 lb	8 to 10 hr
20 to 24 lb	10 to 12 hr

Microwave Thawing

Follow the oven manufacturer's instructions when thawing a turkey in the microwave. Check the instructions for the size turkey that will fit in your oven, the minutes per pound, and the power level to use for thawing. Remove any outside wrapping and place the turkey in a microwave-safe dish. It is best to use the defrost function based on weight. Generally, allow about 6 min per pound of turkey when using the microwave for thawing. To avoid cooking, rotate and flip the turkey several times during the thawing process. Once the turkey is thawed, plan to **cook it immediately**.

Note: Remember to remove the giblets from the turkey cavity after thawing and cook them separately.

SAFE COOKING

Set the oven temperature to **no lower than 325 °F**.

Place your turkey on a rack in a shallow roasting pan large enough to hold the turkey and a food thermometer.

For food safety and uniform doneness of the turkey, **cook stuffing separately in a casserole dish**. Use a food thermometer to check that the **internal temperature of the stuffing has reached 165 °F** in the middle, thickest part.

Where to Measure the Temperature

Check the internal temperature in several locations, being sure to include the wing joint, the innermost part of the thigh and wing, and the thickest part of the breast. Whole poultry is safe when the meat is cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer. All turkey meat, including any that remains pink, is safe to eat as long as **all parts reach at least 165 °F**.

If the turkey has a “pop-up” temperature indicator, we recommend that a food thermometer also be used to test in several places, including the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast, to ensure the internal temperature has reached at least 165 °F.

Roasting Time

Many factors can affect the roasting time of a whole turkey.

A slower cooking time might be caused by:

- cooking a frozen or partially frozen turkey, which takes longer to cook than a completely thawed turkey.
- using a foil tent for the entire cooking time.

A faster cooking time might be caused by:

- using a dark roasting pan.
- putting a lid on the roasting pan.
- using an oven-cooking bag.

Judging the cooking time for your turkey will be easier if the following chart is used.

The times listed are for a **fresh or thawed**

turkey in an oven at 325 °F. These times are approximate; the only way to determine doneness is by using a food thermometer. When turkey is removed from the oven, **let stand 20 min**.

Turkey size	Estimated cooking time
4 to 6 lb (breast)	1 ½ to 2 ¼ hr
6 to 8 lb (breast)	2 ¼ to 3 ¼ hr
8 to 12 lb	2 ¾ to 3 hr
12 to 14 lb	3 to 3 ¾ hr
14 to 18 lb	3 ¾ to 4 ¼ hr
18 to 20 lb	4 ¼ to 4 ½ hr
20 to 24 lb	4 ½ to 5 hr

STORING LEFTOVERS

Cut the turkey into small pieces and refrigerate turkey, stuffing, and gravy separately in shallow containers within **2 hr of cooking (or 1 hr in temperatures above 90 °F)**.

Use leftover turkey, stuffing, and gravy within **3–4 days or freeze these foods**. For best quality, use frozen leftovers within 2 to 6 months.

It is safe to refreeze leftover turkey and trimmings, even if you purchased them frozen. Wrap them tightly for best quality.

Reheat leftovers thoroughly to a temperature of 165 °F, using a food thermometer to check the internal temperature.

Additional Resources

University of Georgia Extension. (n.d.). *Keep food safe at home*. <https://www.fcs.uga.edu/extension/food-keep-food-safe-at-home>

United States Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service. (2025). *Your safe Thanksgiving guide*. <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/poultry/your-safe-thanksgiving-guide>

The permalink for this UGA Extension expert resource is fieldreport.caes.uga.edu/publications/C1226/.