

# Ask an Expert – Let's Talk Turkey! Six Poultry Preparation Pointers

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Thanksgiving is just around the corner, and it's time to talk turkey! Because of the increased number of turkeys prepared during the holidays, food-borne illnesses often increase. If not handled, thawed, and cooked properly, turkey and all poultry can carry Salmonella, a common type of bacteria that can cause food-borne illness. Consider these tips for preparing a safe and succulent turkey this year.

1. Properly thaw the turkey. This is the first and most important food safety step. The best way to do this is in the refrigerator. Make sure the turkey is still in its original wrapper, and place a tray underneath it to catch juices and prevent cross-contamination. For every 4 to 5 pounds of turkey, you will need 24 hours of thawing time, so be sure to give yourself enough time to thaw it properly. Once thawed, refrigerate and cook it within 1 to 2 days.
2. If you need to thaw the turkey more quickly, use the cold-water method. Place the turkey in an airtight package or leak-proof bag. Submerge the turkey in cold water for 30 minutes per pound, changing the water every half-hour so it stays cold. Cook immediately.
3. If you purchased a smaller turkey, it may be possible to thaw it in the microwave if it will fit. Check the manufacturer's instructions for the size of the turkey, minutes per pound, and the power level for thawing. Roast it immediately after thawing.
4. It is never safe to thaw turkey and other meat on the counter. Doing so puts the meat in what

food safety experts call the danger zone, 40 to 140 F, where bacteria multiply rapidly. Under ideal conditions, bacteria can double every 10 to 20 minutes. That means one cell can increase to more than 16 million cells in 8 hours. For this reason, all perishable foods such as poultry should never be held at room temperature for more than 2 hours.

5. To roast a turkey, set the oven temperature no lower than 325 F. Despite what you may hear, cooking a turkey for a lengthy time, such as overnight, at a very low temperature is not safe. This encourages bacterial growth. To check for doneness, use a meat thermometer inserted into the thigh. Do not rely on the pop-up thermometer alone. Meat thermometers are available at reasonable prices in most supermarkets and variety stores. For safety, the thigh meat should reach 165 F. If the bird is stuffed, stuffing should reach 165 F as well.
6. After the meal, promptly refrigerate leftovers in shallow containers. Some people leave turkey and other perishable items out for guests to enjoy all day, but this practice is unsafe. Place perishable items in the refrigerator. If people want to snack, they can take the food out of the refrigerator.

For more information on turkey preparation and storage, contact your local USU county Extension office. You can also contact USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline at 888-674-6854.

For holiday recipes, shopping and cooking tips, and ideas for leftovers, download USU Extension's free [Create Better Health Holiday Recipe Book](#).

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