

Ask an Expert: Let's Talk Turkey! Preparation Pointers for Safety

Darlene Christensen

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By: Darlene Christensen, USU Extension associate professor, 435-277-2406, darlene.christensen@usu.edu

Thanksgiving is just around the corner, and it's time to talk turkey! Food-borne illnesses often rise during the holidays because of the increased number of turkeys prepared. 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 thaw it is in the refrigerator. Make sure it is still in its original wrapper, and put a tray underneath it to catch juices and prevent cross contamination. You will need 24 hours of thawing time for every 4 to 5 pounds of turkey, so make sure you give yourself enough time to properly thaw it. Once thawed, keep it refrigerated and cook it within 1 to 2 days.

2. If you need to thaw the turkey more quickly, you can 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, and make sure to change 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 turkey, the minutes per pound and the power level for thawing. Roast it immediately after thawing.

4. It is never safe to thaw turkey or other meat on the counter. This is putting the meat in what food safety experts call the danger zone, 40 to 140 F, which is 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. In spite of what you may hear, it is not safe to cook a turkey for a lengthy time, such as overnight, at a very low temperature. 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. To be safe, the thigh meat should reach 165 F. If the bird is stuffed, the 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 all day for guests to nibble on. This is not safe. Place perishable items in the refrigerator. If people want to snack, they can get the food back out of the refrigerator.

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

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