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## TURKEY BASICS 101

A large crowd to cook for, a big bird to roast, and too many cooks in the kitchen can lead to foodborne illness from holiday dining. But handling and cooking a turkey needn't be an illness waiting to happen. A whole turkey is a large bird to handle; however, the basics of thawing, handling, and roasting it to a safe temperature are easy things to do.

### Safe Thawing:

There are three safe ways to thaw food:

- ▶ in the refrigerator
- ▶ in cold water
- ▶ in the microwave oven.

Store frozen turkeys in the freezer until time to thaw. While frozen, a turkey is safe indefinitely. However, if the turkey is allowed to thaw at a temperature above 40° F, any harmful bacteria that may have been present before freezing can begin to multiply again unless proper thawing methods are used.

When thawing a turkey in the refrigerator, plan ahead. Place the turkey on a platter and place in the refrigerator. For every 5 pounds of turkey, allow approximately 24 hours of thawing in a refrigerator set at 40° F.

For thawing in cold water, allow about 30 minutes per pound. Be sure the turkey is in leak-proof packaging and submerge it in cold tap water. Change the water every 30 minutes until the turkey thaws.

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When thawing in the microwave, follow the manufacturer's instructions. For both defrosting in cold water and in the microwave, cook the turkey immediately after thawing because conditions were not temperature controlled.

### **Stuffing a Turkey:**

The safest way to cook stuffing is in a casserole, not inside a bird. Bake the casserole in an oven set no lower than 325° F -- or in a microwave oven -- until the internal temperature reaches at least 165° F on a food thermometer. Harmful bacteria can survive in stuffing that has not reached a safe temperature, possibly resulting in foodborne illness.

Cooking a stuffed turkey is riskier than cooking one not stuffed. However, if both the stuffing and turkey are handled safely and a food thermometer is used, it is possible to cook a stuffed turkey safely. Mix wet and dry stuffing ingredients just before spooning it loosely into the turkey cavity, and roast the turkey immediately. Check the temperature of both the stuffing and the turkey. Do not remove the turkey from the oven until the stuffing reaches 165° F.

Thawing and stuffing a turkey safely are the first two basics. But cooking is the only way to destroy bacteria. The oven temperature must be set no lower than 325° F. Overnight cooking of a turkey at a low temperature can result in foodborne illness.

The internal temperature, on a food thermometer, of a whole turkey must reach 180° F in the innermost part of the thigh. If the turkey has a "pop-up" temperature indicator, it is also recommended that a food thermometer be used to test the turkey in several places. To read more "Turkey Basics" and print a cooking time chart, go to [www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/pubs/tbcook.htm](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/pubs/tbcook.htm).

**Source:** Food Safety and Inspection Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250-3700. "USDA Teaches Turkey Basics for Safe Holiday Cooking." WASHINGTON, Nov. 8, 2001. <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/news/2001/tbasics.htm>

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