

TRADITIONAL THANKSGIVING FEAST

Turkey is a Thanksgiving staple. It's also one of the most difficult items to cook for a large gathering. To prevent foodborne illness and to make the best turkey possible, pay close attention to preparation, cooking, and storing.

You should allow one pound of turkey for each adult guest at your dinner. This allows everyone to enjoy a generous serving of turkey and guarantees enough extra turkey for additional meals.

Most people cannot tell the difference between fresh and frozen turkeys. The main thing to remember when purchasing a turkey is that a fresh turkey needs to be refrigerated until time to cook. Likewise, a frozen turkey needs to be kept in the freezer until it is time to thaw for roasting.

The best way to thaw a turkey is in the refrigerator. Simply place the turkey, in its original wrapping, in a shallow pan in the refrigerator. You need to allow 24 hours thawing time for every 4 pounds of turkey, so you would allow 4 days for a 16-pound turkey to thaw. After complete thawing, the turkey can stay in your refrigerator for 1 to 2 days before roasting.

Make sure you have space in a refrigerator and keep the turkey below foods that will be eaten uncooked. That way, no raw turkey juice will drip on raw or already cooked foods.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends NOT stuffing your Thanksgiving turkey. For the best most uniform results for both the turkey and stuffing, cook the stuffing in a separate dish.

Set your oven temperature no lower than 325 degrees F. Although many factors, including oven calibration, beginning temperature, and type of roasting pan, affect how long it takes your turkey to cook thoroughly, the following times are a good guideline for an unstuffed

turkey at 325 degrees F.: 8 to 12 pounds - 2 3/4 hours to 3 hours; 12 to 14 pounds - 3 hours to 3 3/4 hours; 14 to 18 pounds - 3 3/4 hours to 4 1/4 hours; and 18 to 20 pounds - 4 1/4 hours to 4 1/2 hours.

For safety and doneness, the key is for the turkey to reach an internal temperature of 165 degrees at the thickest part of the turkey. Use a meat thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the breast or wait for the pop-up timer in the breast to pop up.

If stuffing is in a turkey, the stuffing must reach 165 degrees too. The turkey may become overdone while the stuffing cooks to the right temperature.

For quality, let the turkey stand 20 minutes before carving. The turkey will continue cooking and firm up. This will allow the turkey to carve easier and give you time to make the gravy.

Problems tend to happen when people let cooked turkey sit out. Don't let the turkey sit in room temperature for more than two hours. Cut up the turkey, take the meat off the bones, and put the leftovers in the refrigerator.

Cutting the turkey into smaller pieces will allow the turkey to cool quickly and safely inside a refrigerator, without warming up everything else in your refrigerator.

Use cooked turkey and stuffing within three to four days, gravy within one to two days. Cooked turkey keeps up to three to four months in the freezer.

Reheat foods thoroughly to a temperature of 165 degrees F. Bring gravy to boil before using.

For further information on turkey preparation contact the Nebraska Extension in Otoe County Office at 402-269-2301 or the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-674-6854.

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