

Thaw and cook your Thanksgiving turkey safely

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On Thanksgiving, many of us will take on the challenge of cooking 12-20 plus pounds of poultry. This is not something we do every day! The basics of roasting a turkey at 325 degrees for approximately 15 minutes per pound are pretty simple. But, there is more to the safe preparation of the turkey.

Before purchasing the turkey, assess your freezer and refrigerator space. Is there ample freezer space to store a frozen turkey and enough refrigerator space to thaw a turkey?

Thawing a turkey takes time. In the refrigerator allow 24 hours (or more) for each 4-5 pounds of turkey. Hold no more than 1-2 days after thawing. You can speed up the process by thawing in cold water. Place the turkey in its original packaging in cold water, allowing 30 minutes per pound to thaw. Change the water every 30 minutes. Cook the turkey immediately after it is thawed. Do not thaw frozen food on the counter.

It is safe to cook a turkey from the frozen state. The cooking time will take at least 50 percent longer than recommended for a fully thawed turkey. For example, a frozen 18-20 pound turkey will take about 6 1/2 hours; with a fully thawed turkey check for doneness after 4 hours. Remember to remove the giblet package during the cooking time.

Even if your turkey has a "pop-up" temperature indicator, it is recommended that you also check the internal temperature of the turkey in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast with a food thermometer. A whole turkey is safe when cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 165 degrees. Consumers may prefer to cook the turkey to higher temperatures of 170 degrees in the breast and 180 degrees in the thigh.

Within two hours, put leftover cooked turkey in shallow containers and place in the refrigerator. Use leftover turkey, stuffing and gravy within three to four days. Cooked turkey keeps for three to four months in the freezer. When using leftovers, reheat the food thoroughly to 165 degrees.

For a personal answer to your turkey preparation questions, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll-free at 1-888-674-6854 Monday-Friday and on Thanksgiving Day from 7 a.m.-1 p.m.