Nebraska Lincoln EXTENSION

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Avoid Guessing About Holiday Food Safety

Compiled by Alice Henneman, MS, RD, *UNL Extension Educator*

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During the coming holidays, thoughts turn to family, food, and finding enough time to fit everything in!

Food safety may take a back seat as we take short cuts, prepare foods ahead, cook late into the night, and host numerous holiday feasts.

Before you cook the turkey, set up the buffet, or start making holiday goodies, see how you do on this holiday food safety quiz, based on information from the USDA and the Food and Drug Administration.

Approximately, how long should you allow for thawing a frozen turkey in the refrigerator?

a. 24 hours per each 1–2 pounds of turkey
b. 24 hours per each 4–5 pounds of turkey
c. 24 hours per each 6–7 pounds of turkey

Answer: b. Place the frozen bird in its original wrapper in the refrigerator (40°F or below). Allow approximately 24 hours per each 4–5 pounds of turkey. A thawed turkey can remain in the refrigerator for 1–2 days.

THAWING TIME IN THE REFRIGERATOR	
Size of Turkey	Number of Days
4–12 pounds	1–3 days
12–16 pounds	3–4 days
16–20 pounds	4–5 days
20–24 pounds	5–6 days

What is a safe internal temperature for cooking a whole turkey?

a. 145°F
b. 155°F
c. 165°F

Answer: c. Use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of the turkey. A whole turkey is safe cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 165°F throughout the bird. Check the internal temperature in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. If you have stuffed your turkey, the center of the stuffing must also reach 165°F.

For reasons of personal preference, you may choose to cook turkey to a higher temperature. All turkey meat, including any that remains pink, is safe

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to eat as soon as all parts reach at least 165°F.

The stuffing should reach 165°F, whether cooked inside the bird or in a separate dish.

Let turkey stand 20 minutes after removing it from the oven. Remove any stuffing and carve the turkey.

COOKING TIME — UNSTUFFED	
Size of Turkey	Estimated Time to Reach 165°F
8–12 pounds	2¾–3 hours
12–14 pounds	3–3¾ hours
14–18 pounds	3¾–4¼ hours
18–20 pounds	4¼–4½ hours
20–24 pounds	4½–5 hours

COOKING TIME — STUFFED	
Size of Turkey	Estimated Time to Reach 165°F
8–12 pounds	3–3½ hours
12–14 pounds	3½–4 hours
14–18 pounds	4–4¼ hours
18–20 pounds	4¼–4¾ hours
20–24 pounds	4¾–5¼ hours

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Which of the following are important practices to follow if stuffing a turkey?

a. Do not mix wet and dry ingredients for a stuffing until just before stuffing the bird
b. Stuff the turkey loosely
c. Cook a stuffed turkey immediately
d. Use a food thermometer
e. b, c, and d
f. All of the above

Answer: f. Cooking a home-stuffed turkey is riskier than cooking one not stuffed. Even if the turkey itself has reached the safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F as measured in the innermost part of the thigh, the wing and the thickest part of the breast, the stuffing may not have reached a temperature high enough to destroy bacteria that may be present.

Stuff it safely with these suggestions from USDA:

1. **Prepare Stuffing Safely** — If you plan to prepare stuffing using raw meat, poultry, or shellfish, you should cook these ingredients before stuffing the turkey to reduce the risk of foodborne illness from bacteria that may be found in raw ingredients. The wet ingredients for stuffing can be prepared ahead of time and refrigerated. However, do not mix wet and dry ingredients until just before spooning the stuffing mixture into the turkey cavity.
2. **Stuff Loosely** — Do not cool the stuffing. Spoon it directly into the turkey cavity right after preparation. Stuff the turkey loosely — about 3/4 cup of stuffing per pound. The stuffing should be moist, not dry, because heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment. Do not stuff turkeys to be grilled, smoked, fried, or microwaved.
3. **Cook Immediately** — Immediately place the stuffed, raw turkey in an oven set no lower than 325°F.
4. **Use a Food Thermometer** — For safety and doneness, check the internal temperature of the turkey and stuffing with a food thermometer. If the temperature of the turkey and the center of the stuffing have not reached a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F, further cooking will be required. Do not remove the stuffing from the turkey before it reaches 165°F because the undercooked stuffing could contaminate the cooked meat. Continue to cook the turkey until the stuffing is safely cooked.
5. **Let It Rest** — Let the cooked turkey stand 20 minutes before removing the stuffing and carving.
6. **Refrigerate Promptly** — Refrigerate the cooked turkey and stuffing within 2 hours after cooking. Place leftovers in shallow containers and use within 3–4 days. Reheat leftovers to a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F.

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What is the longest that perishable food should sit out at room temperature on a buffet table?

a. 2 hours
b. 3 hours
c. 4 hours

Answer: a. Foods should not sit at room temperature for more than two hours. Keep track of how long foods have been sitting on the buffet table and discard anything there two hours or more.

Divide cooked foods into shallow containers to store in the refrigerator or freezer until serving. This encourages rapid, even cooling. Reheat hot foods to 165°F. Arrange and serve food on several small platters rather than on one large platter. Keep the rest of the food hot in the oven (set at 200–250°F) or cold in the refrigerator until serving time. This way foods will be held at a safe temperature for a longer period of time.

REPLACE empty platters rather than adding fresh food to a dish that already had food in it. Many people's hands may have been taking food from the dish, which has also been sitting out at room temperature.

Hold hot foods at 140°F or warmer. On the buffet table you can keep hot foods hot with chafing dishes, slow cookers, and warming trays. Cold foods should be held at 40°F or colder. Keep foods cold by nesting dishes in bowls of ice. Otherwise, use small serving trays and replace them.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more holiday food safety tips, go to *http://go.unl.edu/holidayfood*.

References:

- *Food Safety for those Glorious Holiday Goodies!, Partnership for Food Safety Education, accessed Sept. 19, 2011 at* http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/pubs/holiday_goodies1.pdf
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