November: Thanksgiving Turkey Tips

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Nebraska Lincoln EXTENSION
Know how. Know now.

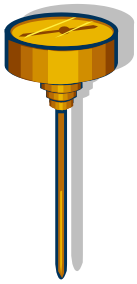
As Thanksgiving approaches, planning and preparing for the holiday dinner can result in anxiety and questions. What kind of turkey should I buy? Should I buy a frozen or fresh turkey? How do I store my turkey? A few simple steps will ease holiday fears and ensure a delicious and a safe meal for family and friends. The following tips may help you prepare a successful and safe holiday meal.

Thanksgiving Turkey Tips:

Plan ahead. Cut down on holiday anxiety and stress by planning ahead. Plan the menu two to three weeks before the holiday. Shopping early will ease the countdown tension for your Thanksgiving meal.

Fresh or Frozen? That is one of the Thanksgiving turkey questions. There is no difference in quality between a fresh or frozen turkey. You can buy a frozen turkey in advance and take advantage of special sales. Fresh turkeys provide convenience because they don't require thawing, but they have shorter shelf lives. Before buying, make sure there is enough space in the refrigerator or freezer.

When to buy the bird. A whole frozen turkey takes about 24 hours per four to five pounds to thaw in the refrigerator. Purchase a frozen turkey as far in advance as necessary to safely thaw it in the refrigerator. If buying fresh, purchase it only one to two days before the meal and keep it refrigerated.



How do you know when it's done? A whole turkey is safe when cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit, as measured with a food thermometer. Insert a food thermometer into the thickest part of the thigh, not touching bone to measure the temperature.

Carving and food safety. Worried about food safety when carving and serving turkey this Thanksgiving? It's best to let the turkey rest for 20 minutes before carving to allow juices to set, and it will carve easier. Use a clean cutting board that has a well to catch juices. Remove stuffing from the turkey cavity. Make sure the knife is sharp before you start carving.

Storing your Thanksgiving leftovers. It's important to store leftover turkey in shallow containers and put them in the refrigerator or freezer within two hours. Use cooked leftover turkey, stuffing and gravy within three to four days. Cooked turkey keeps for three to four months in the freezer. Reheat leftovers thoroughly to 165 degrees Fahrenheit and bring gravy to a boil before serving.

Who you gonna call? The USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline can answer food safety questions on weekdays year-round. This toll-free service provides answers to questions about the safe storage, handling, and preparation of meat, poultry, and egg products. It's staffed by food safety specialists with backgrounds in home economics, nutrition, and food technology. *Call the hotline at:* 1-888-674-6854 *or send an Email to:* mphotline.fsis@usda.gov.

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Additional Resources & Links:

- **Thanksgiving tips and time-saving ideas.** Includes tips on cooking a turkey the day before, traveling with holiday foods, recipes, how to prepare gravy, when to start thawing a turkey, cooking meats other than turkey, safety tips if you want to fry a turkey, online games for kids and MUCH MORE. http://food.unl.edu/web/safety/thanksgiving-food-prep

- **4-Day Throw Away Campaign and App.** Learn more about leftover safety and how to protect yourself and your family from bad leftovers. http://www.4daythrowaway.org/

- **Food Safety for Families.** Holiday food safety newsletter. http://go.unl.edu/7fo

- **Food Safety for Families.** Let's talk turkey. http://go.unl.edu/0jd

- **Let's talk about thawing a turkey.** This is a YouTube video posted by USDA Food Safety that gives step-by-step instructions for safely thawing your turkey. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCostombqR4

- **Holiday Food Safety Success Kit.** Find tips on food safety, shopping organizers and checklists, and menus and recipe ideas for the holidays. http://www.holidayfoodsafety.org/

Sources:

1. United Sates Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). 2010. Seasonal Food Safety: Countdown to the Thanksgiving Holiday. Accessed at: http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Countdown_to_the_Holiday/index.asp.

2. Partnership for Food Safety Education. 2012. Food Safety: The Turkey. Accessed at: http://www.holidayfoodsafety.org/index.php/food-safety/turkey

3. Albrecht, J. 2008. Food Safety for Families: Let's Talk Turkey. UNL Extension. Accessed at: http://food.unl.edu/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=4c40101a-cdcc-4ed1-8fee-14cf9ad89b96&groupId=4089449&.pdf.

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Scan this QR Code with your smartphone or other electronic device to go directly to Thanksgiving tips page on the food.unl.edu website.