How to Cook Turkey

Food safety is important when cooking a turkey. Improperly cooked turkey could make your family sick.

**Thawing a Turkey**

Three ways are safe—in the refrigerator, in cold water that is changed every 30 minutes, or in a microwave oven. Do not thaw a turkey at room temperature. Make sure the turkey is completely thawed before cooking.

**Thawing a Turkey in the Refrigerator:** This method takes the longest time but is the easiest and safest way. Put the frozen turkey (still in its original packaging) on a deep tray on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator. This will prevent the juices from dripping onto other foods. This method requires planning ahead as it will take about 24 hours for every 4 to 5 pounds. A 20-pound turkey will take between four and five days to completely thaw. It is safe to keep the thawed bird in the refrigerator for 1 to 2 days before cooking it.

**Thawing in Cold Water:** This method requires the most time and attention as well as a deep kitchen sink. Put the frozen turkey (still in its original packaging) in the clean sink. Cover the turkey completely with cold water. It will take about 30 minutes per pound to completely thaw the turkey. A 20-pound bird will take ten hours to thaw. The water must also be changed every 30 minutes to be sure it is cold. If the packaging is torn, put the turkey in a leak-proof plastic bag, close completely and then place in water. Cook the turkey immediately after it is thawed.

**Thawing in the Microwave:** To thaw in the microwave, check your owner’s manual to be sure that your turkey is not too big for the size of your microwave oven. Also, check the minutes per pound and the power level to use for thawing as well as cooking. Turkeys thawed in a microwave must be cooked immediately after thawing.

### Table 1. Thawing Times for a Turkey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turkey Size (lbs.)</th>
<th>Refrigerator (Days)</th>
<th>Cold Water (Hours)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8–12</td>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>4–6</td>
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<tr>
<td>12–16</td>
<td>3–4</td>
<td>6–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–20</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>8–10</td>
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<tr>
<td>20–24</td>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>10–12</td>
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</table>

**Preparation**

After thawing, prepare the turkey for cooking.

1. Remove the original packaging from the thawed or fresh turkey.
2. Remove the giblet packet from the body or neck cavity.
3. If you are stuffing the turkey, stuff immediately before cooking.
4. Return the legs to a tucked position, if untucked.
5. Insert an oven-safe meat thermometer into the deepest part of the thigh, without touching bone. If you are using an instant-read thermometer instead of a meat thermometer, do not keep the thermometer in the bird while it is cooking.
6. Brush the skin with oil to prevent drying.

Wash hands, utensils, sink and everything that has been in contact with the raw turkey. After washing, sanitize the counter, sinks and any containers or trays that have been used. To sanitize, prepare a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented chlorine bleach to 1 gallon of warm, not hot, water. Immerse the washed items in this solution, remove, and let
air dry. If you cannot immerse the item, such as the countertop, saturate the surface with the sanitizing solution and let air-dry.

**Note:** It is best not to rinse the turkey before cooking because the rinse water would contaminate the sink and, if water is splashed, the counter and other surfaces around the sink. Cooking the turkey to a safe temperature—165 °F or hotter—kills bacteria on the surface of the turkey.

**Stuffing a Turkey**
Cooking a home-stuffed turkey can be riskier than cooking one that is not stuffed. If the stuffing is not thoroughly cooked, foodborne illness could occur. To stuff and cook a turkey safely, follow these steps:

**Prepare Stuffing Safely:** Moist and dry ingredients can be prepared separately ahead of time. Store moist ingredients (butter/margarine, cooked celery and onions, broth, etc.) in the refrigerator. Both moist and dry ingredients should be combined immediately before the bird is stuffed, never in advance, even if refrigerated. Use only cooked ingredients, such as sautéed vegetables, cooked meats and seafood (oysters). If eggs are used, be sure that they are pasteurized liquid eggs and not raw shell eggs. Moist stuffing is better than dry stuffing as heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment.

**Stuff the Bird Properly:** Loosely stuff both the neck and body cavities. Use about three-quarters cup of stuffing per pound of turkey. For example, no more than 15 cups of stuffing should be used in a 20-pound bird.

**Cook at the Proper Temperature:** Put the stuffed turkey immediately in a preheated oven set no lower than 325°F. Cooking overnight at a low setting (200 to 250 °F) is unsafe. Bacteria can easily grow under these conditions.

**Use a Food Thermometer:** Always check the stuffing temperature to make sure it is done. Even if the turkey has reached 165 °F in the innermost part of the thigh, the stuffing might not have reached 165 °F in the center. It is very important that all parts of the stuffing are cooked to 165 °F for safety.

**Pre-stuffed Poultry:** Pre-stuffed whole poultry is highly perishable and should only be purchased if it has a USDA or state mark of inspection on the package. This means the turkey has been processed under controlled conditions. Never thaw a pre-stuffed frozen bird before cooking. Always cook from the frozen state. Follow the package directions to ensure a safely cooked product.

**Cooking a Turkey**

**Safety & Preparation for All Methods:**
- Never brown or partially cook a turkey to finish cooking later. It is safe to partially cook or microwave a turkey if it is immediately transferred to a hot grill, deep fryer, or oven to finish cooking.
- It is not necessary to baste a turkey. Pouring juices over a turkey’s surface while it cooks will not make the meat juicier. The liquid penetrates only about ⅛ to ¼ of an inch beneath the skin and most of the juice will run off into the pan. Opening the oven door to baste a turkey can cool the oven and possibly increase the cooking time.

**Roasting:** The open pan roasting method will consistently create a juicy, tender, golden brown turkey.
1. Place thawed or fresh turkey, breast up, on a flat rack in a shallow pan, 2 to 2½ inches deep.
2. Brush or rub skin with oil to prevent drying of the skin and to enhance the golden color.
3. Insert an oven-safe meat thermometer into the thickest part of the thigh, without touching bone.
4. Place in a preheated 325 °F oven.
5. When the skin is a light golden color and the turkey is about two-thirds done, shield the breast loosely with a tent of lightweight foil to prevent overcooking of the breast.
6. Use the roasting schedule in Table 2 as a guideline; start checking for doneness a half-hour before recommended end times.
7. Turkey is safely cooked when the internal temperature is at least 165 °F when checked with a food thermometer. Check the internal temperature (even if the turkey has a “pop-up” indicator) in the innermost part of the thigh and wing as well as in the thickest part of the breast, without touching bone. It is
perfectly safe to cook the turkey to a higher temperature for taste or texture preferences.

8. Let turkey stand for 15 to 20 minutes before carving to allow juices to set.
9. Remove all stuffing from the turkey cavities.

Table 2. Approximate Roasting Times for Turkey at 325 °F

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Turkey (lbs.)</th>
<th>Unstuffed Timing (Hours)</th>
<th>Stuffed Timing (Hours)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8-12</td>
<td>2¾-3</td>
<td>3-3½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-14</td>
<td>3-3¼</td>
<td>3½-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-18</td>
<td>3¾-4¼</td>
<td>4-4¼</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>4¼-4½</td>
<td>4½-4¾</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24 lbs.</td>
<td>4½-5</td>
<td>4¾-5¼</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Always use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of both turkey and stuffing.

Smoke-Cooking:
1. Soak hardwood chips in water for 1 to 2 hours. Do not use softwood (pine, fir, cedar or spruce) chips which cause discoloration and off-flavors.
2. Use only a completely thawed turkey.
3. Remove giblets and neck and drain juices.
4. Do not stuff.
5. Insert oven-safe meat thermometer into deepest part of the thigh, not touching bone.
6. Brush skin lightly with vegetable oil.
7. Plug in electric smoker or ignite charcoal about 30 minutes before cooking.
8. Position foil-lined water pan in smoker according to manufacturer’s directions; fill pan with water.
9. Check temperature of grill at grate. The temperature must be between 225 to 300 °F.
10. Place turkey on grill. Cover and adjust vents according to manufacturer’s directions.
11. Maintain 225 to 300 °F throughout cooking. If using a charcoal smoker, add additional briquettes every 1 to 1½ hours.
12. Replenish water and soaked hardwood chips as needed.
13. Cook the turkey to at least 165 °F in breast and innermost part of thigh.

Safety Notes for Smoking Turkey
- Always follow equipment manufacturer’s guidelines.
- Cooking times will vary depending on wind, weather, altitude and type of equipment.
- For safety, turkey must reach 140 °F in four hours or less. Check after 3½ hours, if temperature is low, finish in oven.
- Use a thermometer to double-check the turkey smoker temperatures.
- Total cooking time will be increased 10 minutes or more each time lid is lifted.
- Smoking has no preservative effect. Smoked turkey must be refrigerated.

Deep-Fat Fried, Whole Turkey: This method of preparation requires special equipment and costs more money. You will need a 40- or 60-quart pot with basket, a burner and a propane gas tank; a candy thermometer to measure oil temperature; and an instant-read thermometer to determine if the turkey is done. For added safety, have a fire extinguisher and pot holders nearby. Never leave the hot oil unattended, nor allow children or pets near it. Never fry a turkey indoors or in a garage or other enclosed structure. Do not fry on wood decks, which could catch fire, or on concrete, which can be stained by the oil.

Safety Frying a Whole Turkey:
1. Start with a completely thawed turkey. Do not stuff the turkey to deep fry.
2. Use a pot large enough to hold the turkey and enough oil to cover it. This could be as much as five gallons of oil. Set up your turkey fryer on level dirt or a grassy area.
3. Determine the correct amount of oil by covering the turkey in the pot with water to a level 1 to 2 inches above the turkey. Remove the turkey and measure the distance from the top of the pot to the surface of the water. Pour out the water and dry the pot thoroughly. Be sure to measure for oil before breading or marinating the turkey.
4. Heat the oil to 350 °F. Depending on the amount of oil used, this takes between 45 minutes to an hour. Most people prefer peanut oil. Carefully put turkey in the oil.
5. Cook for 3 minutes per pound. Skin will be black and wings will be burned.
6. Use an instant-read thermometer to check for doneness. Turkey is done when the thermometer registers an internal temperature of 165 °F.
7. Carefully remove the turkey from the oil and serve.
8. Allow the oil to cool before disposing or storing it. To store oil, strain through cheese cloth or a coffee filter and refrigerate. Do not store oil that has been heated to the smoking point, has turned dark or has an off-odor. Reuse the oil within a month and discard if it foams when reheated.

**Microwaving:** Always check the owner’s manual for cooking recommendations.
- A 12 to 14 pound turkey is the maximum size most microwaves can hold.
- Allow 3 inches oven clearance on top and 2 to 3 inches of space around bird.
- *Do not stuff!*
- Use an oven-cooking bag for more even cooking.
- Microwave on medium-high (50 percent) for a whole turkey, 9 to 10 minutes per pound.
- Always use an instant-read thermometer to determine doneness. Never keep the thermometer in the turkey while it is being microwaved. The temperature of the turkey must be at least 165 °F for it to be done.
- Let turkey stand 20 minutes before carving.

**Leftovers**
Within two hours after cooking, remove stuffing from turkey and carve the meat off the bones. Put leftovers in shallow containers, no more than 2 inches deep, and refrigerate or freeze. It is best to use refrigerated leftovers within three or four days, or freeze. To freeze, wrap in freezer paper or heavy-duty foil, or put in freezer bags or freezer containers. For best quality, use frozen leftovers within three to four months.

**Giblets**
**Safe Handling:** In whole, ready-to-cook poultry, giblets are located in a bag in the abdominal cavity. They will not be from the original bird. Giblets may also be purchased separately as livers, hearts, or a combination of both, and labeled accordingly. At home, immediately put giblets in a refrigerator that is at 40 °F or colder, and use within one or two days. Giblets can also be frozen at 0 °F or colder. For best quality, use frozen giblets within three to four months.

**Thawing:** There are three safe ways to thaw giblets — in the refrigerator, in cold water that is changed every 30 minutes or in a microwave oven. Do not thaw giblets at room temperature.

**Refrigerator Thawing:** A 1-pound carton of frozen turkey livers will take about 24 hours to completely thaw. Once thawed, the giblets may be stored in the refrigerator for one to two days. During this time, if you do not use the giblets, you can safely refreeze them.

**Cold Water Thawing:** Leave the giblets in the original airtight packaging or place in a leak-proof bag. Cover the package with ice cold water and change the water every 30 minutes to make sure it stays cold. A 1-pound carton of livers should thaw in one or two hours. Foods thawed by the cold-water method must be cooked immediately.

**Microwave Thawing:** Cook giblets immediately after thawing in a microwave oven. Holding partially cooked food is not recommended because any bacteria that may have been present may not have been destroyed. Foods thawed in a microwave oven must be cooked immediately.

**Cooking:** Traditionally, turkey giblets are cooked by simmering in water for use in flavoring soups, gravies or poultry stuffing. Once cooked, the liver will become crumbly and the heart and gizzard will soften and become easy to chop. Cooked giblets should have a firm texture and their juices should run clear. Casseroles and stuffing containing giblets must be cooked to at least 165 °F. Chicken giblets are commonly fried or broiled. Leftovers should be refrigerated within two hours.

**Accidental Cooking in Packaging:** Some giblets are paper wrapped before being inserted into the poultry body cavity. In this case, there would be no concern if the giblets were accidentally cooked inside the bird to a safe temperature. If giblets were packed in a plastic bag, and the bag has been altered or melted by the cooking process, do not eat the giblets or the poultry. Harmful chemicals could have leached into the surrounding meat. If the plastic bag was not altered, the giblets and poultry should be safe to eat as long as the meat is fully cooked.
Sources:


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