

TITLE: Tips and Resources for a Bacteria-Free Thanksgiving

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More than 46 million turkeys are eaten on Thanksgiving Day and with the never-ending list of side dishes and desserts, it is by far the largest and most stressful meal many consumers prepare all year, leaving room for mistakes that can make guests sick.

“We receive an increase of calls on the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline around Thanksgiving because people are stressed and have a lot of questions about thawing and cooking their turkey,” said Marianne Gravelly, senior technical specialist at USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. “Since this is such a large family feast, we want to make sure people prepare their food in a safe manner to avoid foodborne illness.”

Follow these tips and use these resources to help make this Thanksgiving feast a safe and healthy one.

- **Fresh or Frozen**

If buying a fresh turkey, purchase one to two days before you plan to cook it and place it in the refrigerator until you are ready to cook. Do not buy fresh, pre-stuffed turkeys. If not properly handled, harmful bacteria that may be in the stuffing can multiply quickly.

Frozen turkeys should be thawed in the refrigerator. Allow 24 hours for every 4 to 5 pounds. For example, if you purchase a 12 to 16 pound turkey, it will need three to four days to thaw in the refrigerator. A pre-stuffed frozen turkey should not be thawed. Follow the packaging directions and cook directly from the frozen state.

- **Don't Wash the Bird**

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 68 percent of people wash their turkey before cooking; however, USDA does not recommend it because washing raw meat or poultry can splash bacteria around the sink, across countertops and into already prepared foods. Cooking turkey to the correct internal temperature of 165°F will kill any bacteria, making washing an unnecessary step. The exception to this rule is brining. When rinsing brine off of a turkey, be sure to remove all other food or objects from the sink, layer the area with paper towels and allow a slow stream of water to avoid splashing.

- **Use a Food Thermometer**

The only way to determine if a turkey (or any meat, poultry or seafood) is cooked is to check its internal temperature with a food thermometer. A whole turkey should be checked in three locations: the innermost part of the thigh, the innermost part of the wing and the thickest part of the breast. Your thermometer should register 165°F in all three places.

- **Clear out Fridge for Leftovers**

A day or two before the holiday, be sure to clear out any old food taking up space in your refrigerator. If you aren't sure if it's still good to eat, download our Foodkeeper app. It's available for download on [Apple](#) and [Android](#) devices, the app provides storage times for more than 400 food items. Once your refrigerator is clear, you will have room to store all of those Thanksgiving leftovers. Do not leave leftovers on the table or countertop for people to graze, because food will enter into the danger zone (temperatures between 40°F and 140°F) where

bacteria multiply rapidly. Instead, place food in shallow containers and place them in the refrigerator.

- **Have Questions? Call the Hotline**

If you have questions about your Thanksgiving dinner, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) to talk to a food safety expert. You can also chat live at [AskKaren.gov](https://www.askskaren.gov), available from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET, Monday through Friday, in English and Spanish. If you need help on Thanksgiving Day, the Meat and Poultry Hotline is available from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. ET.
