

Title: You've Got the Right Stuff(ing)! Tips to Handle Stuffing With Care

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Stuffing is a big favorite around the Thanksgiving holiday. Although it is delicious, covered with gravy and mixed with slices of moist turkey, this side dish can also be dangerous. Because moist, warm stuffing is an excellent medium for bacterial growth, it's important to handle it safely and cook it to a safe minimum internal temperature as measured with a food thermometer. Around the holidays, many consumers call USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline and ask stuffing-related questions. So here are a few stuffing tips to help make your Thanksgiving dinner safe.

Step 1

The dry and wet ingredients for stuffing can be prepared separately ahead of time and chilled, but do not mix the dry and wet ingredients together until you are ready to spoon the stuffing mixture into the turkey cavity. Spoon the stuffing in loosely — about 3/4 cup of stuffing per pound. It's generally recommended to stuff smaller or medium size birds. This makes it easier to take an internal temperature reading (minimum 165°F), whereas large birds mean larger cavities, causing you to go much deeper into the center of the stuffing to get a good thermometer reading.

Stuffing should be moist, not dry, because heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment.

Step 2

Once the bird is stuffed, it should be placed immediately in an oven set no lower than 325°F. Check out the [cooking chart](#) for recommended cooking times for stuffed turkey of various sizes. A food thermometer should be used to check the internal temperature of the turkey in the thickest part of the breast, the innermost part of the wing and the innermost part of the thigh and inside the stuffing to ensure all locations reach 165°F. If the turkey reaches a safe temperature and the stuffing has not, be sure to leave the bird in the oven until the stuffing reaches 165°F. Remove the turkey from the oven and let it stand 20 minutes before serving.

Step 3

If you don't plan on stuffing the bird, but preparing the dressing as a side dish, you can prepare uncooked stuffing ahead of time as long as you freeze the stuffing immediately after mixing the wet and dry ingredients. USDA recommends that you never refrigerate uncooked stuffing. Why? Remember, stuffing can harbor bacteria, and though bacteria grow slower in the refrigerator they can cause problems because stuffing is a good medium for bacteria growth, therefore a higher risk food in terms of cooking safely.

It is safe to freeze uncooked stuffing; however, the ingredients must be combined, put into a shallow container, and frozen immediately. To use it, do not thaw before cooking. Cook from the frozen state until the stuffing reaches 165°F.

Step 4

For leftovers, remember the 2-hour rule and refrigerate cooked poultry and stuffing within two hours to avoid bacteria from multiplying on room-temperature food. Leftover stuffing should be consumed or frozen within 3-4 days. Do not stuff a whole turkey (or any poultry) with leftover cooked stuffing.

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