Thanksgiving Turkey Safety

Cooking for a crowd, and in larger proportions than you’re used to, increases your risk of making a food safety mistake. Turkey meals are linked to outbreaks of Salmonella, Campylobacter, Clostridium perfringens and Staphylococcus aureus, but proper cooking and handling – both before and after the meal – can dramatically reduce the risk of illness to yourself and your guests.

FROM THE STORE to your home, the turkey should spend as little time as possible at room temperature. If you’re out holiday shopping, make the grocery store your last stop, and at the grocery store, get the turkey last. Place it in a separate plastic bag to avoid contaminating other foods, and once home, place the turkey immediately in a freezer (if frozen) or refrigerator (if fresh) – make sure to place the turkey on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator so juices don’t contaminate foods below.

TO THAW A FROZEN TURKEY, place it on the bottom shelf of a refrigerator. For best results, allow 24 hours of thawing per 5 pounds of turkey. Many turkeys may take 3-4 days to thaw, and will need to begin thawing as early as the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Frozen turkey cooks at a different rate than thawed turkey, so improperly thawed turkeys increase the risk of foodborne illness. Don’t thaw turkeys on counter tops or in microwaves; if you’re in a hurry, and the turkey is in leak-proof plastic packaging, a turkey can be thawed in cold water. This will thaw a turkey at a rate of one pound every half hour; make sure you replace the water every 30 minutes.

WHEN PREPARING A TURKEY, clean and sanitize utensils and work surfaces before and after use. Wash your hands before and after handling the raw turkey. Don’t wash the turkey – cooking to the proper temperature will adequately sanitize the meat, while washing a bird may aerosolize bacteria up to 3 feet in all directions, contaminating much of your kitchen.

TO COOK A TURKEY, place it in a shallow pan – at least 2” deep – in an oven no less than 325°F. Cook the turkey until it reaches an internal temperature of 165°F as determined by a meat thermometer. A meat thermometer is the only sure way to tell if a turkey is done – cooking a turkey until it’s an appropriate color, until the pop-button pops, or until the juices run clear are not appropriate ways to determine if a turkey is done. Insert the meat thermometer into the thickest parts of the thighs and breast, and avoid touching bone. Take the temperature in several locations. We do not recommend cooking stuffing inside the turkey’s cavity, but if you do, make sure the internal temperature of the stuffing is also 165°F.

LEFTOVERS should be refrigerated within 2 hours of when the turkey was taken out of the oven. Make sure leftovers can cool off quickly – down to 41°F – so don’t overstuff containers: store leftovers no more than 2” deep in food-storage containers or small plastic storage bags.

As a rule of thumb:
- 2 hours – from the oven to the fridge
- 2 inches – store refrigerated food at a shallow depth, no more than 2” deep
- 4 days – eat or freeze leftovers within 4 days