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How Can I Safely Prepare My Turkey?

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A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Safely Prepare My Turkey?

Georgia Lauritzen answers:*

Your Tom Turkey won't bring unwanted bacteria to the table if you prepare it carefully and refrigerate leftovers quickly after serving. These practices will ensure safe eating for all who gather at your table.

- If you are not going to stuff your turkey and don't mind the increased cooking time, you can take it directly from the freezer to the oven and have a juicy, tender bird with only about 5 minutes preparation time. Use a thermometer to test doneness. The final temperature should be at least 180 degrees in the thigh or 170 degrees in the breast.
- For an 8-10 pound bird, this method will increase cooking time at 325 degrees by approximately 2 hours (from about 3 1/2 to 5 1/2 hours) and for a 20 pound bird it will increase about 3 hours (from about 6 1/2 to 9 1/2 hours.)
- The easiest and safest way to defrost a turkey is to put it in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. A 4-12 pound bird will take one to two days to defrost, 13-20 pounds will take two to three days and over 20 pounds could take up to five full days to safely defrost.
- The turkey should not be stuffed the night before roasting, especially if you are adding cooked dressing to an uncooked turkey. This will cause the turkey to warm up and keep the dressing from quickly cooling to a safe temperature.
- Leftovers need to be cooled to below 40 degrees as soon as possible to prevent food spoilage and possible poisoning. The best method is to slice the turkey and put the leftover dressing in shallow pans for quick chilling.

* Georgia Lauritzen is Utah State University Extension Food and Nutrition Specialist