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How Can I Safely Prepare A Turkey For Dinner?

Charlotte Brennand

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ask A Specialist

A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Safely Prepare A Turkey For Dinner?

Charlotte Brennand answers:*

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

- Use a thermometer to test doneness. The final temperature should be at least 170 degrees as measured in the thickest portion of the breast or thigh. A bird cooked to 170 degrees will be juicier but not fall off the bones like one cooked to 180-185 degrees.
- The easiest and safest way to defrost a turkey is in the refrigerator. Place the bird in a pan to catch any drips. 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 will 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.
- After preparing the bird for roasting, wipe up any juices that may have spilled on the kitchen counter. Use a sanitizing agent such as a chlorine solution (one tablespoon chlorine in a quart of water) or any commercial cleaning agent labeled "disinfectant."
- Leftovers need to be chilled to 40 degrees as soon as possible to prevent food spoilage and possible poisoning. For quick chilling, slice the turkey and put the leftover dressing in shallow containers or plastic food bags that when filled and flattened will be about two inches high.
- If you are not going to stuff your turkey and don't mind the increased cooking time, you can take the turkey directly from the freezer to the oven and have a juicy, tender bird with only about five minutes actual preparation time. Remove plastic wrapping from the turkey. Place the turkey in a shallow roasting pan and cover loosely with foil. Put turkey in oven and heat oven to 325 degrees. A 10 pound bird will take approximately 7 hours; 14 pound, 8 hours; 20 pound, 9 hours; 24 pound, 9 ½ hours. Remove foil tent and turn the oven up to 400 degrees for the last 15-30 minutes to brown the bird. Remove giblets and neck before serving.

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* Charlotte Brennand is Utah State University Extension Food Safety Specialist