How to Have a Safe Thanksgiving Dinner

A Step-by-Step Food Safety Guide.

Enjoy a safe and healthy holiday!



1 BUY & THAW SAFELY

Choose the right turkey

- **Fresh turkey:** Buy 1-2 days before cooking.
- **Frozen turkey:** Buy early and allow time to thaw

Safe thawing methods

☑ In the refrigerator
☑ In cold water (change water every 30 minutes)

Never

✖ Thaw on the counter
✖ Thaw in the garage, porch or basement
✖ Thaw in hot water

Refrigerator thawing chart

Weight	Time
4–12 pounds	1–3 days
12–16 pounds	3–4 days
16–20 pounds	4–5 days
20–24 pounds	5–6 days

Cold water thawing chart

Weight	Time
4–12 pounds	2–6 hours
12–16 pounds	6–8 hours
16–20 pounds	8–10 hours
20–24 pounds	10–12 hours



Thaw in the refrigerator.

Allow about 24 hours for every 4–5 pounds of turkey.



Change water every 30 minutes. Cook immediately after thawing.

2 CLEAN & PREPARE SAFELY

Wash your hands, not your turkey

- Do not rinse or wash raw turkey.
- Washing can spread bacteria through water droplets.
- Wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds before and after handling raw turkey.
- Clean and sanitize food-contact surfaces.

Prevent cross-contamination

Handling a raw turkey:
Use separate cutting board, utensils, plate or pan.

Handling ready-to-eat foods:
Use different cutting board, utensils, serving platter.



Never place cooked turkey on a plate that held raw turkey.

3 COOK THE TURKEY SAFELY

Use a food thermometer.

It's the only way to know for sure your turkey is safely cooked.

Do not rely on:

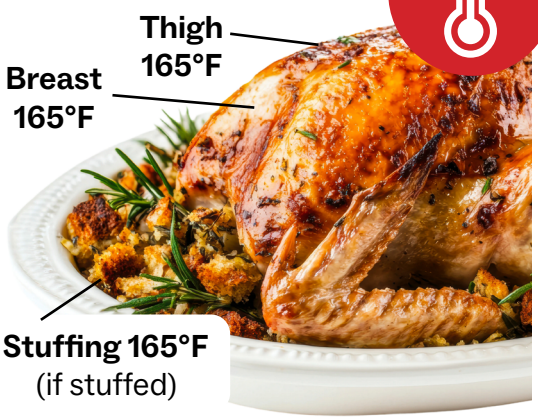
- ✖ Brown skin
- ✖ Clear juices
- ✖ Cooking time alone
- ✖ Meat color

Cook to 165°F

Check the temperature in:

- ☑ Thickest part of the breast
- ☑ Innermost part of the thigh
- ☑ Center of the stuffing (if cooked inside the bird)

All checked locations must reach 165°F.



4 SERVE SAFELY

Keep hot foods hot (140°F or higher)

- Use slow cookers, chafing dishes, warming trays or a warm oven.
- Examples: turkey, stuffing, gravy, casseroles.

Keep cold foods cold (40°F or lower)

- Keep in the refrigerator until serving.
- Use ice-filled trays or bowls.
- Examples: salads, deviled eggs, fruit trays, cheese trays.

The 2-hour rule

Refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours.

Throw away perishable foods left out longer than 2 hours.

5 STORE LEFTOVERS SAFELY

Cool foods quickly

- Slice turkey from the bone.
- Divide large amounts into shallow containers.
- Refrigerate promptly.

Leftover storage guide

Turkey, Stuffing, Gravy, Cooked Vegetables, Casseroles, Pumpkin Pie

Refrigerate (40°F or below) **for 3–4 days**

Reheat safely

Reheat to 165°F before serving.

165°F

Use a food thermometer to check the temperature.

Remember these four numbers!

20 seconds
Wash hands with soap and water.

40°F cold foods
Keep cold foods at or below **40°F.**

140°F hot foods
Keep hot foods at or above **140°F.**

165°F turkey
Cook turkey, stuffing and leftovers to **165°F.**

Food Safety Checklist

- ☐ Turkey thawed safely
- ☐ Turkey not washed
- ☐ Hands washed often
- ☐ Separate cutting boards
- ☐ Turkey reached 165°F
- ☐ Stuffing reached 165°F
- ☐ Hot foods held 140°F
- ☐ Cold foods below 40°F
- ☐ Leftovers refrigerated 2 hours

Extension
University of Missouri
an equal opportunity/ADA institution

NEW 11/26 | N550

REFERENCE

U.S. Department of Agriculture. "The Recipe for a Safe Thanksgiving." Nov. 13, 2026. (https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USDAOC/bulletins/43288ab)