

Safe Handling of Ready-Prepared Holiday Turkey Dinners



WARNING:
Buying a refrigerated, fully cooked, stuffed turkey is NOT recommended!

Properly prepared and handled foods can ensure a safe holiday meal. Follow these steps to make sure your meal is safe and convenient.

Hot from the Oven *Eating within 2 hours?*

Pick up the food **HOT**, and keep it **HOT**. Keeping foods **warm is not enough**. Harmful bacteria multiply fastest between 40 °F and 140 °F.

Set your oven's temperature high enough to keep the turkey at 140 °F or above. (Use a meat thermometer.) Stuffing and side dishes must also stay **HOT**. Covering with foil will help keep your food moist.

Eating much later?

It's not a good idea to try to keep foods hot longer than 2 hours. They will be safer and taste better if you—

- remove all stuffing from the turkey cavity immediately and refrigerate.
- cut turkey off the bone and refrigerate. Slice breast meat. Legs and wings may be left whole.
- Refrigerate potatoes, gravy, and vegetables in shallow containers.

Cooked and Refrigerated

Keep cold foods **COLD**. Refrigerate as soon as you get home (always within 2 hours). Plan to serve your meal within 1–2 days.

Cooked Frozen Turkey and Individually Wrapped Side Dishes

No directions on the label?

Follow these steps:

- Thaw the wrapped cooked frozen turkey on a tray in the refrigerator. Allow about a day for every 5 pounds. Small packages of stuffing, gravy, potatoes, etc., will thaw in less time. Side dishes can go from freezer to oven, if you like.
- Once the cooked turkey thaws, plan to eat it within 3–4 days (stuffing and gravy in 1–2 days). You may eat the turkey cold.

Reheating?

Reheat thoroughly to 165 °F until hot and steaming. Bring gravy to a rolling boil.

In the **microwave** oven, cover food and rotate dish so it heats evenly. Inadequate heating in the microwave can contribute to illness. Consult your owner's manual for complete instructions.

Reheating a whole turkey is NOT recommended. If you plan to reheat a turkey, cut the meat off the bone. Slice the breast meat. Legs and wings may be left whole. Refrigerate in shallow containers.

Exception: Cooked turkeys with the USDA inspection seal on the packaging have been processed under controlled conditions. Read and follow package directions for thawing, reheating, and storing.



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What to Do with Those Leftovers?

Food Storage Guidelines

Perishable foods should not be out of the refrigerator for more than 2 hours. Refrigerate or freeze leftovers promptly in shallow containers.

It is safe to freeze leftover turkey and trimmings—even if you purchased them frozen. Wrap tightly for best quality.

Recommended Storage Times

These short but safe limits will help keep food from spoiling or becoming dangerous to eat.

Storage in the refrigerator (40 °F or below)

Cooked turkey3–4 days
Stuffing and gravy1–2 days
Other cooked dishes3–4 days

Storage in the freezer (0 °F or below)

Turkey slices or pieces, plain.....4 months
Turkey covered with broth or gravy6 months
Cooked poultry dishes4–6 months
Stuffing and gravy1 month

Foods frozen longer remain safe, but they may be drier and may lose some flavor.

For more information about food safety, contact the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline
1-888-MPHotline | 1-888-674-6854 | mpholine.fsis@usda.gov



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