

## Purchasing, thawing and cooking your turkey

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Many people only purchase and prepare turkey around the holidays, so the following information has been developed as a guide for purchasing and preparing turkey.

### Selecting a turkey

The first decision you need to make is whether you will purchase a fresh or frozen turkey. A fresh turkey is more convenient because it can be purchased and prepared at the last minute. However, fresh turkeys often must be ordered in advance to assure their availability.

Because fresh turkeys require special handling, they can be more expensive. The advantage of the frozen bird is that it can be bought in advance. This allows you to take advantage of special prices.

Next, after you've decided on a fresh or frozen turkey, you'll need to decide how large of a turkey to purchase. If you're planning to have leftovers, purchase one pound of turkey per person. If you don't want extra turkey at your house, or are purchasing a bone-in turkey breast, plan on 3/4 of a pound per person. When buying boneless turkey breast, look for a turkey that will provide 1/2 pound of turkey per person. In addition to pounds, the size of a turkey can also be classified by the terms "hen"



Roasted turkey with meat thermometer

or "tom." Tom turkeys are the larger turkeys and hens are the smaller ones.

Also, you may see the terms "basted" or "self-basting" on the package. This means the turkey has been injected with products such as butter, other types of fat, broth, spices or flavor enhancers to add flavor and a golden brown color to the skin. Each manufacturer may use different ingredients, so be sure to read the label to determine which ingredients were used.

### Storing and thawing turkey

A fresh turkey should be purchased no more than three days prior to preparation and should be refrigerated at a temperature of 40° F or below. Frozen turkey should be kept in a freezer at 0° F or below until it's time to thaw the turkey.

The preferred method for thawing a frozen turkey is in the refrigerator. Allow one day of thawing for every five pounds of turkey. To thaw the turkey faster, use a cold water bath. When using a cold water bath, keep the turkey wrapped during the process and completely submerge the turkey in cold water. Change the water every thirty minutes. For every pound of turkey to thaw, allow thirty minutes in the cold bath. It will take approximately

four hours to thaw an eight pound turkey in a cold water bath.

**Cooking stuffing**

The safest method for cooking the stuffing is in a casserole dish. If you do choose to stuff your turkey, take the proper precautions. Prepare the stuffing right before placing it in the turkey. Stuff the turkey loosely. If too much stuffing is put inside the turkey, it is difficult for the stuffing to reach the proper cooking temperature of 165° F which increases the potential for foodborne illness. You should use a meat thermometer to assure the stuffing reaches 165° F.

**Cooking turkey**

There are many ways you can cook your turkey: roasting, smoking, frying and even microwaving. No matter which method you are going to use, the first step is to remove the package from the outside of the turkey and then remove the neck and giblets from the inside of the turkey cavities. Giblets are the liver and heart of the turkey and are cooked separately and used for flavoring the stuffing or gravy. The turkey should then be rinsed inside and out with cold water and patted dry.

**Roasting**

Roasting the turkey is the most common method of preparation. You'll end up with a golden brown, juicy turkey and your house will smell wonderful during the process. To roast a turkey, place it breast side up on a rack in a shallow pan. Insert a meat thermometer into the thickest part of the thigh. Rub the skin with oil to prevent drying. This also helps the turkey to brown. Basting a turkey typically isn't necessary because the liquid only penetrates about 1/8 to 1/4 of an inch.

Place the turkey in the oven after it has been preheated to 325° F and cook until the meat thermometer inserted into the innermost part of the thigh or breast reads a minimum of 165° F, meaning the turkey is safe to eat. The juices should run

clear when the turkey is pierced with a fork. Once the turkey has reached the proper temperature, remove it from the oven and let it sit for 20 minutes. This allows the juices in the meat to settle and redistribute.

If the turkey starts to get too brown during the cooking process, make an aluminum foil tent over the bird to prevent further browning.

**Approximate times for roasting are:**

Size of Turkey	Unstuffed	Stuffed
8-12 lbs	2¾ – 3 hrs	3 – 3½ hrs
12-14 lbs	3 – 3¾ hrs	3½ – 4 hrs
14-18 lbs	3¾ – 4¼ hrs	4 – 4¼ hrs
18-20 lbs	4¼ – 4½ hrs	4¼ – 4¾ hrs
20-24 lbs	4½ – 5 hrs	4¾ – 5¼ hrs

As mentioned above, turkeys can also be smoked or fried. A benefit of smoking or frying a turkey is that the oven is left available to cook other dishes. Both frying and smoking result in a tasty turkey, but you must take care to assure a safe product.

**Smoking**

To smoke a turkey safely, you need two thermometers – one for the meat and one for the smoker – as well as a smoker and hardwood chips. For food safety reasons, the turkey needs to be thawed completely and not stuffed (see above for instructions on how to safely thaw a turkey).

Soak the hardwood chips in water for one or two hours. While they are soaking, prepare the turkey by brushing the skin with cooking oil and insert a meat thermometer into the deepest part of the thigh without touching a bone. Plug in the electric smoker or light the charcoal smoker about 30 minutes before you are ready to start cooking. The grill temperature at the grate should be 200 to 250° F. If you are using a charcoal smoker, add briquettes every hour to hour and a half to help maintain proper temperatures. Place the foil-lined

water pan in the smoker and fill the pan with water. Place the turkey on the grill and adjust the vents according to manufacturer's instructions.

The turkey should cook to a temperature of 180° F. It can take up to 12 hours, depending on the weather and your equipment. Remember, every time you lift the lid, you add 10 minutes to the cooking time. If the thermometer does not reach 140° F in four hours, finish cooking the turkey in the oven to prevent the growth of harmful bacteria (foods left under 140° F for over four hours can become unsafe to eat).

### Frying

Fried turkey cooks a lot faster but requires special care and handling. As with smoked turkey, start out with a completely thawed, unstuffed bird (see above for instructions). The container you fry in must be large enough to hold the turkey with room for oil to cover it. To determine how much oil is needed, place the turkey in the kettle and cover with water 1 to 2 inches above the turkey. Remove the turkey and measure the distance from the top of the pot to the water line. The oil should be filled to the same level.

Heat the oil to 350° F. Allow 45 minutes to one hour for the oil to heat. Use a candy thermometer to determine the temperature of the oil. Peanut oil is a good choice for frying because it does well at high temperatures.

When the oil reaches 350° F, carefully lower the turkey into the cooking pot. It takes 3 to 5 minutes per pound for the turkey to cook. The skin will be black and the wings will be burnt. When the turkey begins to float, it is considered done. To make sure it has reached the appropriate temperature, remove the turkey from the oil and insert a thermometer into the thigh. If the thermometer does not reach 180° F, return the turkey to the oil for additional cooking.

Once the turkey is finished cooking, slice and serve it. Your Thanksgiving guests will enjoy this traditional bird prepared in a nontraditional way.

### WARNING!

#### **Deep frying turkey can be dangerous.**

*The following information is adapted from the National Fire Protection Association website.*

*Please remember that your safety and the safety of your family is the most important thing to think about during the holidays.*

Deep frying turkey can be dangerous because:

Many units can easily tip over, spilling the 5 gallons of hot oil within the cooking pot.

If the cooking pot is overfilled with oil, the oil may spill out of the unit when the turkey is placed into the cooking pot. Oil may hit the burner/flames causing a fire to engulf the entire unit.

Partially frozen turkeys placed into the fryer can cause a spillover effect. This too, may result in an extensive fire.

With no thermostat controls, the units also have the potential to overheat the oil to the point of combustion.

The sides of the cooking pot, lid and pot handles get dangerously hot, posing severe burn hazards.

#### **If you use a turkey fryer, here are some tips for safer use:**

Turkey fryers should always be used outdoors, a safe distance from buildings and any other material that can burn.

Never use turkey fryers on wooden decks or in garages.

Make sure the fryers are used on a flat surface to reduce accidental tipping.

Never leave the fryer unattended. Most units do not have thermostat controls. If you don't watch the fryer carefully, the oil will continue to heat until it catches fire.

NEVER let children or pets near the fryer when in use. Even after use, never allow children or pets near the turkey fryer. The oil inside the cooking pot can remain dangerously hot for hours after use.

To avoid oil spillover, do not overfill the fryer.

Use well-insulated potholders or oven mitts when touching pot or lid handles. If possible, wear safety goggles to protect your eyes from oil splatter.

Make sure the turkey is completely thawed, and be careful with marinades. Oil and water don't mix, and water causes oil to spill over which could lead to a fire or even an explosion hazard.

The National Turkey Federation recommends refrigerator thawing, and to allow approximately 24 hours for every 5 pounds of bird thawed in the refrigerator.

Keep an all-purpose fire extinguisher nearby. Never use water to extinguish a grease fire.

Remember to use your best judgment when attempting to fight a fire. If the fire is manageable, use an all-purpose fire extinguisher. If the fire increases, immediately call 911 for help.

**Resources:**

- [http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/food/food\\_safety/handling/hgic3560.html](http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/food/food_safety/handling/hgic3560.html)
- [http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact\\_Sheets/Smoking\\_Meat\\_and\\_Poultry/index.asp](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Smoking_Meat_and_Poultry/index.asp)
- <http://www.nfpa.org>
- [http://www.fsis.usda.gov/FactSheets/Lets\\_Talk\\_Turkey/index.asp](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/FactSheets/Lets_Talk_Turkey/index.asp)