USDA Releases Tips For Safe Thanksgiving

WASHINGTON (USDA) —The holiday season is famous for its hustle and bustle, and all of that merriment would not be possible without the hard work of party hosts. This Thanksgiving and throughout the holiday season, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is sharing tips that can take one worry off your plate: foodborne illness.

"All year, Americans look forward to sharing a Thanksgiving meal with family and friends, and USDA wants to make sure that meal is safe as well as delicious," USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety Dr. Elisabeth Hagen said. "Our inspectors work in plants every day to ensure meat and poultry products are safe before they reach the dinner table, and we encourage hosts to take advantage of our resources, like the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline, if they have any questions about how to safely cook, store and serve food for guests."

The USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline (888-MPHotline or 888-674-6854) is staffed with English- and Spanish-speaking food safety experts and is open weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. EST, and from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day. FSIS' virtual food safety representative, Ask Karen, is available 24/7 in English and Spanish at AskKaren.gov [1] or downloadable from the iTunes and Android app stores. The agency also has a Safe Turkey Preparation playlist [2] on its YouTube channel with instructional videos on safely thawing, stuffing, brining, and cooking turkeys.

With Thanksgiving Day coming up in just one week, here is a timeline to help prepare for the big event:

One Week in Advance: Get your frozen turkey ready to cook

Cooks preparing a frozen turkey should make their purchase a few days to a week in advance to allow time for thawing. If you plan to buy a fresh turkey, do not buy it too soon. Fresh, unfrozen poultry should be kept in the refrigerator no more than two days before cooking. This is also a good time to make sure you have a food thermometer for the big day. If not, pick up one at the store when you purchase your turkey.

The optimal place to thaw poultry is in the refrigerator. Leave the frozen bird in its original wrapper and place it on a tray to catch any juices that may leak from the package. Bacteria in meat juices can cross-contaminate other foods that will be eaten without further cooking or that are already cooked, possibly causing foodborne illness. Allow approximately 24 hours of thawing time for every four to five pounds of frozen turkey. Thawed turkey can stay in the refrigerator for one to two days before cooking.

If it is the day before Thanksgiving and your turkey is still in the freezer, or if there is no room in the refrigerator for thawing, do not panic! You can thaw your turkey

by the cold water method. Submerge the turkey, still in its original wrapping, in a container with enough cold water to cover the bird, and change the water every 30 minutes. Calculate 30 minutes per pound of turkey for thawing time.

As a last resort, cook your turkey from the frozen state. It will thaw and cook in one step, but it will require 50 percent more cooking time.

One to Two Days in Advance: Pick your stuffing method

Turkey's most constant accompaniment, stuffing, requires the same food safety caution in its preparation as the bird itself. Bread stuffing, stuffing made from cornbread or rice, stuffing cooked inside the bird or browned in a casserole, or any other variation that your family likes is safest when prepared just before cooking. The dry and wet ingredients for stuffing can be prepared separately ahead of time and chilled, but not mixed until it is time to cook. The stuffing should be moist, not dry, because heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment.

Baking stuffing outside the turkey in a casserole dish is the safest method and provides busy cooks with more flexibility to prepare ahead. If you do not plan to stuff your turkey, it is safe to prepare and immediately freeze or bake the mixture. Never stuff poultry with frozen or pre-cooked stuffing! When needed, cook frozen stuffing directly from the frozen state without thawing first, and heat frozen or pre-baked stuffing to a safe internal temperature of 165 °F before serving.

Thanksgiving Day: Heat it up

Place your raw bird, stuffed or unstuffed, in a preheated oven set to 325 °F or higher. The turkey and stuffing must reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F, as measured with a food thermometer in the innermost part of the thigh, the wing, the thickest part of the breast, and the stuffing in order to destroy bacteria that could be present. Bacteria can survive in turkey or stuffing—whether cooked inside or outside the bird—that has not reached 165 °F, and it may cause foodborne illness.

All turkey meat, including any that remains pink, is safe to eat as soon as all parts reach at least 165 °F. For personal preference, cooks may choose to cook it to higher temperatures. When a whole, stuffed turkey is removed from the oven, let it stand 20 minutes before removing the stuffing and carving the bird. This step allows for easier carving.

Right after Dinner: "Chill out" immediately

After dinner is a wonderful time to relax with guests, but busy cooks should not "chill" until the leftovers do. Bacteria spread fastest at temperatures between 40 °F and 140 °F, so quickly chilling food after a meal reduces the risk of foodborne illness.

After Thanksgiving dinner, cut the leftover turkey into smaller pieces. Place the stuffing and meat into shallow containers and refrigerate (40 °F or below) or freeze

(0 °F or below) the poultry and stuffing within two hours after cooking. Use refrigerated leftovers within three to four days, or freeze them. Reheat leftovers to a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F.

For more information about cooking turkey, other holiday meats such as pheasant, capon, duck, or goose, as well as stuffing, visit www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Seasonal_Food_Safety_Fact_Sheets *[3].*

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