

CONSUMER INFORMATION FROM USDA

Food Safety and Inspection Service, Food Safety Education & Communications Staff
(202)720-7943; Fax (202) 720-9063

Slightly Revised November 1998

Turkey Basics: Safe Defrosting

"The Big Thaw"

Turkeys must be kept at a safe temperature during "the big thaw." While frozen, a turkey is safe indefinitely. However, as soon it begins to defrost, any bacteria which may have been present before freezing can begin to grow again

A package of frozen meat or poultry left thawing on the counter more than 2 hours is not at a safe temperature. Even though the center of the package may still be frozen, the outer layer of the food is in the "danger zone" between 40 and 140 °F -- at a temperature when food borne bacteria multiply rapidly.

There are three safe ways to defrost food: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave.

Handling Frozen Turkeys

Immediately after grocery store checkout, take the frozen turkey home and store it in the freezer - or refrigerator, if you want to begin defrosting it.

Frozen turkeys should not be left on the back porch, in the car trunk, in the basement, or any place else where temperatures cannot be constantly monitored or ensured.

Refrigerator Thawing

When thawing a turkey in the refrigerator, there are several variables to take into account:

- Plan ahead: allow approximately 24 hours for every 5 pounds in a refrigerator set at 40° F.
- Some areas of an appliance may keep the food colder than others. A turkey placed in the coldest part will require longer defrosting time.

Refrigerator Thawing Times

(Whole turkey)

8 to 12 pounds 1 to 2 days
12 to 16 pounds 2 to 3 days
16 to 20 pounds 3 to 4 days
20 to 24 pounds 4 to 5 days

Foods defrosted in the refrigerator can be refrozen without cooking, but there may be some loss of quality.

Microwave Thawing

Follow the microwave oven manufacturer's instructions when defrosting a turkey. Plan to cook it immediately after thawing because some areas of the food may become warm and begin to cook during microwaving. Holding partially cooked food is not recommended because any bacteria present would not have been destroyed.

After cooking, meat from a turkey thawed in the microwave can be refrozen.

Cold Water Thawing

Allow about 30 minutes per pound.

First be sure the food is in a leak-proof package or plastic bag. If the bag leaks, bacteria from the surrounding environment could be introduced into the food. Tissues can also absorb water like a sponge, resulting in a watery product.

Immerse the turkey in cold tap water. Check the water frequently to be sure it stays cold. Change the water every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed.

Cold Water Thawing Times

8 to 12 pounds 4 to 6 hours
12 to 16 pounds 6 to 8 hours
16 to 20 pounds 8 to 10 hours
20 to 24 pounds 10 to 12 hours

A turkey thawed by the cold water method should be cooked immediately. After cooking, meat from the turkey can be refrozen.

Call Toll-free For More Information

USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline
1(800) 535-4555
Washington, DC: (202) 720-3333
TTY: (800) 256-7072

FSIS Web site: www.fsis.usda.gov