

Turkey Basics

Handling Precooked Dinners

Preparing and handling holiday foods properly can assure a safe holiday meal. Follow these steps to make sure your meal is safe as well as convenient.

For some families, a busy lifestyle makes home-cooked turkey dinners a thing of the past. More and more families look to restaurants, grocery stores and caterers to prepare their holiday meals. Precooked dinners can be great time-savers, but they must be handled safely to prevent foodborne illness. The same food safety rules you follow when preparing foods at home apply to precooked dinners.

For Foods You Pick Up Hot

When you pick up food HOT, keep it HOT. Put your bird, stuffing and side dishes in an oven with the temperature set high enough to keep the food at 140 F or above. Insert a meat thermometer in the food periodically to make sure it stays at that temperature. Covering with foil will help keep your food moist.

Eating Much Later?

It's not a good idea to keep foods hot longer than two hours. Follow these guidelines to keep foods safe and tasty:

- Remove all stuffing from the turkey cavity immediately and refrigerate. Use shallow containers to cool it quickly.
- Cut turkey off the bone and refrigerate. Reheating a whole turkey is not recommended. Legs and wings may be left whole, but the breast meat should be sliced.
- Refrigerate side dishes in shallow containers.
- Reheat pieces and side dishes until they reach 165 F. They should be hot and steaming. Always bring gravy and soups to a rolling boil.

- Follow your microwave oven manufacturer's instructions for reheating. Cover food and rotate the dish so it heats evenly. Let the dish sit for a few minutes, then check the temperature with a thermometer to see if it has reached 165 F.

For Foods You Pick Up Cold

When you pick up food COLD, keep it COLD. Follow these guidelines to keep your food safe:

- Remove stuffing, cut turkey off the bone and refrigerate as soon as you get home (always within two hours). Legs and wings may be left whole.
- Refrigerate or freeze in shallow containers.
- Plan to serve your meal within three to four days.
- Reheat your turkey to 165 F.

For Cooked Frozen Turkey and Individually Wrapped Side Dishes

Look for the Inspection Mark

When there is an inspection mark on the packaging, the turkey was prepared in a USDA or state inspected plant under controlled conditions. Always follow package directions for thawing, reheating and storing. When there are no handling instructions on the label, follow these steps:

- Thaw the wrapped, cooked frozen turkey on a tray in the refrigerator. Allow about 24 hours for every 5 pounds. Allow less time for small packages of stuffing, gravy, potatoes and other dishes. Frozen side dishes can go straight to the oven or be thawed in the refrigerator or microwave.

- Plan to eat thawed turkey within three to four days. You may eat the turkey cold or reheat to 165 F.
- If you plan to reheat the turkey, cut the meat off the bone. Legs and wings may be left whole, but the breast should be sliced. Refrigerate leftovers in shallow containers (i.e., containers 2-3 inches thick).

Safe Handling of Leftovers

Refrigerate or freeze any leftovers in shallow containers within two hours. When you purchase frozen precooked turkey, it is safe to refreeze the leftovers. Wrap them securely in wrap or containers made for freezing foods.

Refrigerator Storage Time for Leftovers

Note: Keep your refrigerator at 40 F or below.

Cooked turkey	3-4 days
Stuffing and gravy	3-4 days
Other cooked dishes	3-4 days

Freezer Storage Times for Leftovers

Note: Keep your freezer at 0 F or below.

Turkey slices or pieces, plain	4 months
Turkey covered with broth or gravy	6 months
Cooked poultry dishes	4-6 months
Stuffing and gravy	4-6 months

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

A Word About Buying Stuffed Turkeys

If you choose to buy a frozen stuffed turkey, look for the USDA mark of inspection. USDA does not recommend buying stuffed turkeys prepared at a store or restaurant. If not prepared and handled carefully, the stuffing can be a source of bacteria.

If you have questions about food safety, contact your local Extension office at

Meat and poultry safety questions also may be directed to USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline.

1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)

Email: mpholine.fsis@usda.gov

FSIS website: www.fsis.usda.gov

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