

For many Oklahomans, Thanksgiving and the holidays that follow are opportunities to visit friends and family while enjoying homemade foods. Holidays present unique food safety challenges, so cooks should plan ahead to ensure that holiday foods are safe. Each year, an estimated 76 million cases of foodborne illness occur in the United States. Most of these cases are mild and cause symptoms for only a day or two; however, some are more serious, resulting in approximately 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths. People at the highest risk of being affected by foodborne illness are the elderly, children, individuals with a weakened immune system, and pregnant women. Persons in these high-risk groups should be especially mindful of potential foodborne illness.

The Oklahoma State Department of Health suggests the following food safety tips to enjoy your holiday season:

- **Clean:** Wash your hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds before preparing food and wash food-contact surfaces often. Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils and counter tops with hot soapy water after preparing each food item and before you go on to the next food.
- **Separate:** Don't cross-contaminate and let bacteria cross from one food product to another. This is especially true for raw meat, poultry, and seafood. Keep raw meats and their juices away from ready-to-eat foods such as uncooked fruits and vegetables.
- **Cook:** Cook foods to proper temperatures. Use a food thermometer, which measures the internal temperature of cooked meat, poultry and egg dishes, to make sure that the food is cooked to a safe internal temperature.
- **Chill:** Refrigerate foods promptly. Public health officials advise consumers to refrigerate foods quickly because cold temperatures keep most harmful bacteria from multiplying. Refrigerators should be set at 40°F and the freezer at 0°F, and the accuracy of the settings should be checked often with a thermometer.

Tips for preparing the turkey

Plan Ahead - By following a few simple guidelines, you will ensure a delicious and a safe meal. Plan your menu several weeks before the holiday. Important questions to address before planning your meal include: Do you want a fresh or frozen turkey? Do you have enough space to store a frozen bird if purchased in advance; if not, when should you purchase a turkey? What size bird do you need to buy? If you choose to buy a frozen bird, make sure you have the adequate storage space in your freezer. If you buy a fresh turkey, be sure you purchase it only 1-2 days before cooking. Check to make sure you have all the equipment and ingredients needed to prepare your holiday meal including a roasting pan large enough to hold your turkey and a good food thermometer.

Thawing - Fresh and frozen turkeys are equally safe as long as they are correctly handled and stored. It is important to allow enough time for a frozen turkey to defrost. If a turkey is not properly thawed, the outside will be cooked before the inside. When this happens, the inside might not become hot enough to destroy disease-causing bacteria.

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

- When thawing in the refrigerator, allow approximately 24 hours per 4 to 5 pounds of turkey. A thawed turkey can remain in the refrigerator for 1-2 days.
- If thawing in cold water, allow 30 minutes defrosting per pound of turkey and change the water every 30 minutes. Changing the water keeps the turkey cold, slowing bacterial growth in the outer thawed portions while the inner areas are still thawing.
- When using a microwave, check the manufacturer's instructions for the number of minutes per pound and the appropriate power level to use for thawing.

Recommended Turkey Thawing Times in the Refrigerator and Cold Water		
Size of Turkey	In Refrigerator	In Cold Water
4 to 12 pounds	1 to 3 days	2 to 6 hours
12 to 16 pounds	3 to 4 days	6 to 8 hours
16 to 20 pounds	4 to 5 days	8 to 10 hours
20 to 24 pounds	5 to 6 days	10 to 12 hours

Stuffing - The most reliable way to cook stuffing is separate from the turkey. If you choose to stuff the turkey, it must reach an internal temperature of 165°F before it is safe to eat. If you choose to stuff your turkey, stuff loosely. The stuffing should be moist, not dry, since heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment. The stuffing should reach 165°F, whether cooked inside the bird or in a separate dish.

Cooking - Judging cooking time for your turkey will be easier if the chart listed below is used. The times listed are for a fresh or thawed turkey in an oven at 325°F. **Use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of the turkey**. A whole turkey is safe when cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 165°F throughout the bird. Check the internal temperature of the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. All turkey meat, including any that remains pink, is safe to eat as soon as all parts reach at least 165°F. When turkey is removed from the oven, let it stand 20 minutes. Remove stuffing and carve turkey.

Recommended Turkey Cooking Time - Unstuffed	
Size of Turkey	Hours to Prepare
8 to 12 pounds	2 3/4 to 3 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 to 3 3/4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	3 3/4 to 4 1/4 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4 1/4 to 4 1/2 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4 1/2 to 5 hours

Recommended Turkey Cooking Time - Stuffed	
Size of Turkey	Hours to Prepare
8 to 12 pounds	3 to 3 1/2 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 1/2 to 4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	4 to 4 1/4 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4 1/4 to 4 3/4 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4 3/4 to 5 1/4 hours

Storing Leftovers - Cut the turkey into small pieces; refrigerate stuffing and turkey separately in shallow containers within 2 hours of cooking. Use leftover turkey and stuffing within 3-4 days or freeze them. Reheat thoroughly to a temperature of 165°F.

Storing Gravy - Gravy can be refrigerated or frozen. It is important to cool the gravy promptly after the meal for storage. Refrigerated gravy must be used within two days. Flour-thickened gravy can be frozen in an airtight container up to four months. If you know you will be freezing gravy, try to use as little fat and milk as possible as they tend to separate when thawed. You can reduce the chances of separation greatly if you run the gravy quickly through a blender or food processor before freezing. Cooked meats store and freeze better in their own gravy. The gravy keeps the meat from drying out. Use frozen meat and gravy combinations within 3 months.

Cooking Other Holiday Meats - All meats such as beef, lamb, pork, veal and poultry should be stored in the refrigerator or freezer until prepared for eating. Cook or freeze fresh poultry within 1 or 2 days of purchase and other fresh meats within 3 to 5 days of purchase. Roasting is the recommended method for cooking tender meats. To roast, meat is placed on a rack in a shallow, uncovered pan and is cooked by the indirect dry heat of an oven. To keep the meat tender and minimize shrinkage due to the evaporation of moisture, a moderately low oven temperature of 325°F should be used. The USDA does not recommend cooking meat and poultry at oven temperatures lower than 325°F because these foods could remain in the "Danger Zone" (temperatures of 40° to 140°F) too long. Bacteria which may be present on these foods multiply rapidly at these temperatures. Boned and rolled meats require more cooking time per pound than bone-in cuts because it takes longer for the heat to penetrate through the solid meat. Regardless of your holiday selection, it is important to have a food thermometer on hand to make sure each meat reaches a safe internal temperature when cooking. For more information on cooking other holiday meats, visit USDA's website: http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Roasting_Those_Other_Holiday_Meats/index.asp.

