

Safe Turkey Shortcuts

There is Good News! Yes, there are safe shortcuts one can take to prepare that special turkey during the hectic holiday season. The following suggestions are safe shortcuts that can be implemented to save time.

Know What You're Shopping For

Time can be saved if you know what kind of turkey you want before shopping. Fresh turkey needs to be ordered ahead and picked up 1 to 2 days before cooking. Keep in mind that many grocery stores market pre-stuffed whole fresh turkeys as a time-saver. From a food safety perspective, pre-stuffed whole fresh turkeys can cause problems. The reason for this is that raw turkey and stuffing contain ingredients that are highly perishable. Incubator-type conditions develop in the cavity which create ideal conditions for bacterial growth. Temperatures must be kept below 40°F. It is impossible to keep stuffing in the pre-stuffed turkey below 40°F.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture does not recommend purchasing pre-stuffed whole fresh poultry over 3 pounds. As an alternative, pre-stuffed and ready-to-cook items like boneless turkey breast, veal and pork chops can be used.

If you plan to purchase a frozen turkey, buy it early to get the size you want and keep it frozen until you are ready to thaw and cook it. Keep in mind that your turkey will be taking up space in your freezer.

Pre-cooked turkey is the ultimate shortcut. However, it must also be carefully handled. It must be served immediately or quickly cooled down below 40°F. The standard home refrigerator cannot rapidly cool a whole turkey. To cool down rapidly, if the turkey is stuffed, remove stuffing and place in a shallow container. Next, remove meat from carcass and wrap in individual servings. The meat can be stored in the refrigerator for 3 to 4 days and the stuffing can be stored for 1 to 2 days. To reheat, preheat oven to 325 or 350°F. Estimate 10 minutes per pound so that the meat reaches a temperature of 160°F.

Safe Way to Cut Cooking Time



You can cut cooking time by using a commercial roasting bag. You can save an hour or more depending on the size of the bird. You can also save an additional half hour of cooking time by not stuffing your bird. Using a microwave is another time-saver. But, do not try to microwave a stuffed bird, it is unsafe. A stuffed bird is too dense for microwaving and one cannot assure thorough cooking.

The long cooking at very low temperature (250°F.) method of cooking has been popular. However, this method is not recommended. The turkey (and stuffing) cooking at low temperatures may take up to 4 hours to reach high enough temperatures to destroy the bacteria and, therefore, could be unsafe. Prolonged cooking could also dry out the turkey.

Safe Ways to Serve Food

Trying to save time, a host may put out a huge platter of food on the table before guests arrive. If the platter sits out another 2 or more hours – while the party goes on – bacteria could multiply significantly. To play it safe and save time, smaller platters of food could be made up ahead of time and kept in the refrigerator or oven until refills are needed.

Food should be put out just before guests arrive. Use heated serving units, hot trays or chafing dishes to keep hot foods at temperatures above 140°F. (NOTE: Even in heating units, never leave food out for more than 2 hours.)

Safe Ways to Store Leftovers

Remove the stuffing from the bird and the meat from the carcass. Store them in meal-sized portions in shallow containers. Leftover turkey will keep in the refrigerator for 3 to 4 days. Stuffing and gravy should be used within 1 or 2 days. Remember to bring gravy to a boil (185°F.) before serving.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service

Take Safe Shortcuts and Have a Healthy Holiday!