

IS YOUR HOLIDAY TURKEY IN JEOPARDY?



Defrosted on the counter, prestuffed, slow-baked, partially cooked, stored whole without carving? If any of these situations sound like your usual Thanksgiving dinner preparation plans, you may be putting your turkey in jeopardy. Over the last six years, USDA's staff on the Meat and Poultry Hotline have faced many challenges trying to save Thanksgiving turkeys that have been prepared in questionable ways. *"It's difficult to advise consumers on Thanksgiving day that the turkey they have worked so hard to serve may not be safe to eat."* There are several problems that Hotline staff members hear every year. Read on to see if you may unknowingly be creating any of these scenarios.

MISTAKE #1 — DEFROSTING AT ROOM TEMPERATURE

"We've always done it that way...There's no room in the refrigerator...We forgot it was in the trunk of the car...It's in a cold basement." While there are many reasons why consumers find themselves with turkeys defrosted at room temperature, some planned and some unplanned, the result is the same - a potentially unsafe turkey. Bacteria grow rapidly at room temperature. Bacteria will begin to grow on the outside of the bird that defrosts first. These surface bacteria can multiply to dangerously high levels that cooking may not destroy.

INSTEAD

Plan on 1 day of refrigerator defrost time for every 5 pounds of turkey. A 10-pound turkey will take approximately 2 days to defrost in the refrigerator, a 15-pound turkey 3 days and a 20-pound turkey 4 days. Some callers worry that a frozen turkey will spoil if left in the refrigerator for 4 days. Don't be concerned. Even after a turkey fully defrosts, it is safe in the refrigerator for an additional 1 to 2 days. If you forget to take your turkey out of the freezer early enough, don't panic. You are not in hot water yet, especially if you remember to use the cold water technique. Even a 20-pound frozen turkey can be defrosted in 10 hours using the cold water defrost method. Submerge the wrapped bird in cold water, adding ice or new cold water every 30 minutes.

MISTAKE #2 — PRESTUFFING A TURKEY THE NIGHT BEFORE

It's okay to prestuff holiday stockings, but not Thanksgiving birds! Stuffing a turkey the night before is risky business. The cavity of the bird actually insulates the stuffing from cold temperatures and can keep the stuffing in a temperature range that encourages bacteria growth.

INSTEAD

Prepare dry stuffing ingredients the day before. Tightly cover and leave at room temperature. The perishables - butter or margarine, mushrooms, oysters, cooked celery and onion, broth - should be refrigerated. Combine the dry and wet ingredients and stuff the bird immediately before the turkey goes into the oven.

MISTAKE #3 — COOKING AT LOW TEMPERATURE OVERNIGHT

Every year, Hotline staff members worry about "how low consumers will go" when it comes to oven temperature settings. One Thanksgiving Day, Hotline staff talked with numerous families who calmly slept the night away while bacteria were busily multiplying on their turkeys in 100°F. ovens. Cooking below 325°F. is unsafe because low temperatures permit the bird (and stuffing) to remain in the "danger zone" (140°F.) too long. While in this "zone" bacteria can grow and some produce heat-resistant toxins.

INSTEAD

Cook perishable foods at an oven temperature no lower than 325°F.

MISTAKE #4 — PARTIALLY COOKING A BIRD THE DAY BEFORE

Some time-savers are safer than others. Partially cooking a turkey is not one of them. **Interrupted cooking can actually increase the possibility of bacteria growth.** The turkey may be heated long enough to activate bacterial growth, but not long enough to kill it.

INSTEAD

Cook turkey completely in one operation. Several other ideas for **SAFE** time-saving include: 1) Using oven cooking bags. 2) Baking stuffing separately from the turkey. 3) Cooking and carving turkey 1 to 2 days before the holiday and storing it in the refrigerator for reheating on the big day.

MISTAKE #5 — COOKING A TURKEY AHEAD OF TIME AND LEAVING IT WHOLE IN THE REFRIGERATOR

Cooking the turkey a day or two before the holiday is fine, but refrigerating the bird whole, without carving, is another form of turkey jeopardy. A cooked turkey, stuffed or unstuffed, is too big and too dense to cool down quickly and efficiently in a home refrigerator. In addition, reheating the turkey the next day in a slow oven to prevent drying out could allow even more growth of potential food poisoning bacteria.

INSTEAD

Roast the turkey 1 to 2 days before the holiday. Use a meat thermometer to make sure that the bird reaches 180°F. Remove stuffing immediately after taking bird out of the oven. Allow the turkey to sit for 20 to 30 minutes so that the meat juices can settle. Carve the bird into appropriate serving slices. Arrange turkey slices in shallow baking pans. Cover and refrigerate. Reheat Thanksgiving Day in a conventional oven or microwave. Make sure the meat and stuffing are reheated to "steamy hot" (165°F.).

USDA'S MEAT AND POULTRY HOTLINE

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline answers questions on the safe storage and handling of meat, poultry and other perishable foods. You may speak with a food safety specialist -- in English or Spanish -- from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Eastern time on weekdays year round. An extensive menu of recorded food safety messages may be heard 24 hours a day. Dial the nationwide toll-free number, 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854). The toll-free number for the hearing impaired (TTY) is 1-800-256-7072.

(The Hotline is closed on Federal government holidays, with the exception of Thanksgiving Day. Hours of operation on Thanksgiving are 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., Eastern Time.)

Call - 1-888-674-6854

<http://www.fsis.usda.gov/mph/>