

Thawing the Holiday Turkey

Turkey must be kept at a safe temperature, out of the temperature danger zone, to prevent the growth of bacteria. There are three safe ways to thaw food: in the refrigerator, in cold water and in the microwave.

Refrigerator Thawing

In a refrigerator set at 40°F., plan at least 24 hours for every 5 pounds. Also, keep in mind that some areas in the refrigerator may keep food colder than others. If the turkey is in the coldest part, it will require a longer defrosting time.

Refrigerator Thawing Times	
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

Microwave Thawing



Follow 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.

Cold Water Thawing

Allow about 30 minutes per pound. Make sure the food is in a leakproof package or plastic bag. If the bag leaks, bacteria from the surrounding environment could be introduced into the food. Tissue also absorbs water like a sponge resulting in a watery product. Immerse the turkey in cold 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

Turkeys thawed by cold water method should be cooked immediately.

Sources: Turkey Basics: Safe Defrosting, Food Safety and Inspection Service, November, 1998