

Turkey FUNdamentals

Okay, so it's your turn to host the annual Thanksgiving feast for the entire family. You've known for 3 years that your time was coming, but the advance warning hasn't increased your comfort level. Aunt Sara has been cooking turkeys for 40 years, and Cousin Rachel is a gourmet cook. Can you tackle a turkey without being traumatized? Believe it or not, taking care of "Tom" isn't that tough. Just follow our "Turkey FUNdamentals" and your bird will turn out fine without a lot of toil and trouble. The experts at USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline say that each November, both novice and experienced cooks have the same basic questions on preparing a turkey. Here are the answers.

How big a turkey should I buy?

You will need about 1 pound per person, or 1½ pounds per person if you have hearty eaters or want ample leftovers. If you are having an "open house" and you are not quite sure how much meat you will need, you could cook and carve an extra bird a few days ahead.

When should I buy the turkey?

While the quality and taste of frozen and fresh turkeys are quite similar, the keeping time is not. A frozen turkey can be purchased months in advance; fresh birds should be bought only 1 to 2 days ahead.

What kind of turkey should I buy?

There are basically two types of raw birds to choose from - a prebasted bird (typical ingredients include vegetable oil, broth, spices) or an unbasted bird to which nothing has been added. Personal preference usually dictates this choice. USDA Grade A is the highest quality grade for poultry and the one commonly found in stores. Grade A poultry has good shape/structure, fat covering and is free of pinfeathers and defects, such as cuts or bruises.

Is a tom better than a hen?

Age, not gender, is the determining factor for tenderness. All turkeys in the market are young, usually 4 to 6 months old. A hen generally weighs less than 16 pounds and a tom is usually over 16 pounds.

How long will it take to defrost a turkey?

Defrost turkey in the refrigerator. The rule of thumb is a minimum of 24 hours defrost time for every 5 lbs. of turkey. Thus, it can take 4-5 days to defrost a 20-pound turkey. A completely thawed bird will last 1-2 days in the refrigerator. If you need to speed up defrost time, it is safe to defrost in a large utility sink of cold water. Submerge wrapped bird in cold water. Check or change water every 30 minutes to make sure it remains cold. Allow 30 minutes per pound to defrost this way.

How long should I roast the turkey?

Roughly 15 to 18 minutes per pound for an unstuffed bird and 18 to 24 minutes per pound for a stuffed bird. Have your oven preheated to 325°F. USDA highly recommends the use of a meat thermometer to determine doneness. A whole turkey is done when the temperature reaches 180°F. in the inner thigh. A breast is done at 170°F. The juices should run clear. Stuffing temperature should reach at least 165°F.

Still, cooking times do vary! Every year people wonder why their turkey is done too early or too late. There are many reasons - oven temperature may not be accurate, the turkey is still partially frozen in center or the roasting pan is too small and heat flow is inhibited.

What do I do if the turkey is done an hour ahead of schedule?

It is safe to hold a turkey in the oven at a reduced temperature. First, use a meat thermometer to verify that the bird is done - dark meat has reached 180°F. and the stuffing 165°F. Keep the thermometer in the meat. You will need to lower your oven temperature. Start by moving your oven temperature to 200°F. Adjust the temperature of the oven to assure that the temperature of the turkey never drops below 140°F. Check meat thermometer at several intervals to assure that 140°F. is maintained. Keep the bird covered so it doesn't dry out.



What do I do if the turkey is not done on time?

About the only thing you can do is keep cooking! You can turn the oven up slightly or cover the bird tightly with a lid if you haven't already done so. Do not keep opening and closing the oven door to baste the bird or check its progress. This will only lower the oven temperature and add to the cooking time.

Can you roast the turkey the day before?

Yes. In fact, more and more people are taking this route. However, for safety reasons, the cooked bird must be deboned before being refrigerated. The carved meat should be stored in shallow containers. The meat can then be reheated in the regular oven the next day for approximately 10 minutes per pound. To prevent the meat from drying out, add either the leftover meat drippings, gravy or turkey broth and cover with foil.