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Living Well

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Preparing Thanksgiving Turkey

The Thanksgiving holiday is just around the corner. As the holiday approaches, cooking the traditional turkey can raise many questions. Below are some commonly asked questions received by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Meat and Poultry Hotline.

What size turkey should I buy? Estimate one pound of turkey for each person. That is enough for ample portions and leftovers.

I have a turkey in the freezer from last year. Can I still use it? Yes. Food poisoning bacteria cannot grow in the freezer, so your frozen turkey will be safe to eat. A turkey will keep its top quality a full year in the freezer.

How far in advance can I buy a fresh turkey? If you want to buy a fresh turkey, wait until the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. Some grocery stores will let you reserve a fresh turkey.

How long does it take to thaw a frozen turkey? The safest way to thaw a turkey is to put it in the refrigerator at a safe temperature (40 degrees Fahrenheit) during thawing. Allow one day for each five pounds of weight to thaw the turkey. A twenty pound turkey will take about four days to thaw. After it has thawed, it is safe for another two days.

How do I tell when the turkey is done? Set your oven temperature no lower than 325 degrees Fahrenheit. Place your turkey on a rack in a shallow roasting pan. You will need a meat thermometer to determine doneness. The turkey should test at 165 degrees Fahrenheit

to be safe to eat. Test the temperature at the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. All three must reach 165 degrees Fahrenheit. In planning, a 12-pound unstuffed turkey would need about 3 hours. An 18-pound unstuffed turkey needs about 4 hours 15 minutes and a 24 pound unstuffed turkey needs about 5 hours. After removing the turkey from the oven, let it stand 20 minutes.

Is it safe to cook a turkey from the frozen state? Yes. The cooking time will take at least 50% longer than recommended for a fully thawed turkey. Remember to remove the giblet packages during the cooking time. Remove the packages carefully with tongs or a fork.

If a turkey has a “pop-up” temperature indicator do I still need to use a thermometer? Pop-up temperature indicators are constructed from a food-approved nylon. The indicator pops up when the food has reached the final temperature for safety and doneness. Pop-up temperature indicators have been produced since 1965 and are reliable to within 1 to 2 degrees Fahrenheit if accurately placed in the product. It is recommended that you also check the internal temperature of the turkey in the same three places as mentioned above to ensure safety.

What is the best way to store 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. Reheat thoroughly to a temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

Can I call the Meat and Poultry Hotline on Thanksgiving Day? Yes, the hotline will be staffed from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Eastern Time on Thanksgiving Day by calling 1-888-674-6854. The hotline is also open to receive food safety questions during regular business hours, Monday

through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Eastern Time. You can also ask questions at AskKaren.gov, which is available 24 hours a day.

For more information, visit the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service at www.fsis.usda.gov. You can also contact the Flint Hills Extension District office in Council Grove at 620-767-5136 or the office in Cottonwood Falls at 620-273-6491.

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