



Let's Talk Turkey: Tips and Tricks for a Better Bird

Samantha Kennedy, M.S., Extension Agent

When it comes to holiday meals, the star of the culinary show is often the humble turkey. Founding Father Benjamin Franklin held the turkey in such high esteem, he suggested it as our national bird. Sadly for the turkey, the bald eagle won out. But even today, the turkey is a gastronomic delight for many, serving as an unassuming, yet amazingly versatile choice for many holiday feasts. However, despite its popularity and relative ease of preparation, many people still suffer from dinnertime disasters every year.

To help make your family feast as painless as possible, here are a few simple tips to keep in mind:

Buy a big enough bird. Fresh or frozen, plan for one pound per person. Keep in mind, this isn't one pound of meat, but a pound of total weight, including bones and other inedible parts.

Thaw properly. Thawing a frozen turkey in the refrigerator is your safest bet. Allow 24 hours of thawing time for every 4 to 5 pounds. So, if you buy a 15 pound bird, allow for a minimum of three days of thawing time. You can also thaw a turkey by submersing it in cold water, allowing for 30 minutes of thawing time per pound. You must change the water every thirty minutes to keep the water temperature at a safe level. Remember, thawing food on the counter at room temperature is unsafe and never recommended.

Cook thoroughly. The minimum internal cooking temperature for poultry is 165 degrees Fahrenheit. This temperature must be sustained for at least 15 consecutive seconds to adequately kill any harmful bacteria that may be present. Built-in "thermometers" that come with the bird are not always reliable, so use a calibrated meat thermometer to check the internal temperature. Insert the probe into the thickest part of the bird - the breast - for the most accurate temperature. If you stuff your bird, be sure to check the temperature of the stuffing too, by inserting the thermometer probe into the center of the stuffing. To achieve this temperature goal and to ensure safe cooking, don't set your oven temperature lower than 325 degrees.

Store those leftovers safely. Leaving those leftovers out and picking at them for hours may be a family tradition, but with each passing hour, the risk of foodborne illness increases. Room temperature (even in air conditioning) is smack dab in the middle of the Temperature Danger Zone (TDZ), the range of temperatures in which bacteria and other microorganisms thrive. The TDZ is 41 degrees to 135 degrees, and leaving food too long in this range may lead to the build-up of germs to an unsafe level. So put those leftovers away quickly after the meal, preferably within two hours. And when reheating food, be sure to heat it to at least 165 degrees in the center. If reheating in a microwave, always stir the food halfway through to ensure the food is heated evenly throughout.

With a little careful planning and an eye towards a few simple rules, your holiday turkey will be both safe and delicious. Bon appétit!

For more information on this and other food safety topics, please call the Manatee County Extension Service at (941) 722-4524.

