



# This Thanksgiving, It's Food Safety First in 7 Steps: Tips from Stop Foodborne Illness

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For most people, Thanksgiving dinner is the biggest and most busily prepared meal they cook all year. From planning menus to getting everyone to the table to handling leftovers, there are many opportunities for slip-ups to contaminate food. [Stop Foodborne Illness](#), a national, nonprofit, public health organization dedicated to preventing illness and death from foodborne pathogens, is giving cooks a hand with tips for reducing the risk of foodborne illness every step of Thanksgiving Day.

On Thanksgiving, we love having “too many cooks” in the kitchen; having everyone home to prep, cook, and bake together is one of the best things about the holiday. However, having so many helping hands increases the likelihood of spreading germs. Avoid disaster by reviewing these seven helpful food safety steps:

## **Step 1: Get Organized**

Organize your kitchen by equipping it with important items needed for safe food handling. Make sure you have at least two different cutting boards, one for raw meats and one for other ready-to-eat foods. Also, be sure to have a food thermometer on hand. We prefer digital thermometers because they're easier to read. You will likely need food storage containers—it's best to have shallow rather than deep containers, as they help foods get to a safe temperature faster. Finally, check to be sure your refrigerator and freezer **are set..** Forty degrees Fahrenheit or below for the fridge, and freezing (0°F) or below for the freezer. Remember: while a full freezer retains cold better than an empty one, the fridge needs some room for cold air to circulate.

## **Step 2: Shop with Food Safety in Mind**

When shopping for your Thanksgiving foods and ingredients, look for poultry and meat that has been raised without the routine use of antibiotics. Keep raw poultry, meat and seafood items in separate plastic bags, away from other foods in your cart. Keep things separate through checkout and transporting your food home from the store. Avoid bruised or damaged produce. Avoid canned goods that are dented, leaking or rusted—these can be a breeding ground for harmful bacteria.

**Buy the right bird.** Whole turkeys are sold fresh or frozen and buying the right one is crucial. For those who do their Thanksgiving shopping in advance, Stop suggests selecting a frozen bird to reduce the risk of foodborne illness. Those who prefer serving a fresh turkey should purchase it within two days of Thanksgiving dinner.

**Pro Tip:** Put perishable items, like meat and poultry, in your cart last.

**Shop and drop (groceries off at home).** Though it can be tempting to run errands after grocery shopping, food should not be left in the car for long periods (2 hours or more) of time, as dangerous microorganisms can contaminate perishables. Go home immediately and store food in the refrigerator, freezer, or pantry before doing anything else.

**Step 3: Defrost Safely.** There are three safe [ways to defrost a turkey](#) in the refrigerator, in cold water or in the microwave. Refrigerator thawing takes the longest—24 hours for every 5 pounds of turkey—but is the best method since it uses the least amount of labor and will defrost at a consistent, safe temperature (a 15 lb. turkey will take 3 days). To thaw in cold water, submerge the bird in its original wrapper in cold water, changing the water every 30 minutes. This method takes less time but requires more attention. Estimate 30 minutes per pound (a 15 lb. turkey will take 7.5 hours, and 15 water changes). For those who wait until the last minute and need to thaw fast, refer to your owner's manual for instructions on microwave defrosting.

**Pro tip:** Defrost in advance. A thawed turkey can be kept in the fridge (40°F or below) for up to 4 days. (A [fresh turkey](#) can be kept in the fridge for 1-2 days.)

#### **Step 4: Practice Proper Cleanliness**

[Wash your cooking surfaces and hands](#), just NOT the bird. Food safety experts at the USDA do not recommend washing whole turkeys (or any meat) before cooking. Rather than getting rid of bacteria, the splashing water allows harmful pathogens to contaminate other areas—like sinks, food prep surfaces, and towels—up to three feet away. This is called cross-contamination, which nobody wants.

Keeping your kitchen germ-free is challenging but worth the trouble since you'll be reducing the risk of pathogens and enjoying a clean kitchen as well!

Having dirty hands is the most efficient way to spread germs and cause sickness—so wash them thoroughly with soap and water. Make sure you wash your palms and fingers, between fingers and thumbs, your wrists, back of hands, and under and around fingernails. Doctors scrub for a reason!

#### **Step 5: Cook Safely**

It's not easy to tell when food is contaminated because usually it can't be detected by smell, color or taste. To be safe, use a food thermometer—it will help make certain that potentially dangerous bacteria in your food have been destroyed. Sanitize the thermometer between readings.

The key to using a food thermometer is to make sure the food you are cooking reaches a safe minimum internal temperature. Here are some guidelines:

- Whole turkeys: they should register 165°F in three locations—the innermost part of the thigh, the innermost part of the wing and the thickest part of the breast.
- Ground meats: for all ground meats except for poultry, the safe internal temperature is 160 degrees Fahrenheit. For ground poultry, it's 165°F.
- Whole cuts of meat: for beef, pork and other meats, the safe internal temperature is 145 degrees Fahrenheit. After cooking, the meat should rest for at least 3 minutes before carving or serving.
- Seafood: The safe internal temperature for seafood is 145 degrees Fahrenheit.

**Know your stuffing.** Traditional stuffing is one of the Thanksgiving foods most susceptible to foodborne illness since harmful bacteria can survive in stuffing that does not reach 165°F. Avoid disaster by putting the stuffed bird in an oven, set to 325°F or higher, immediately after preparation and use a food thermometer to ensure the stuffing reaches the safe minimum internal temperature (165 °F).

Better yet, think outside the turkey. Although dressing—preparing stuffing outside of a turkey in a casserole—is safer, cooks still need to be aware of the potential foodborne illness. If using raw meat, poultry or shellfish in the dish, precook the raw ingredients separately first. [For more information.](#)

**Use pasteurized raw eggs.** When recipes call for raw eggs, such as homemade eggnog, meringues, and ice cream, you will be much safer if you buy pasteurized in-shell eggs or liquid egg products at the supermarket. Pasteurized liquid egg products are readily available, and pasteurized in-shell eggs are becoming much more common, so if you don't see them, ask your grocer for assistance.

### **Step 6: Serve Food Safely**

It seems simple enough, but in the rush of food preparation, not to mention getting your football fans to stop watching the game and sit down at the table, it's easy to forget the safety rules for serving.

- Keep hot foods hot: Once the food comes out of the oven, you should serve it within two hours. To be more conscientious, serve hot food in heated serving dishes (such as food warmers) whenever possible.
- Keep cold foods cold: Once cold foods reach room temperature, bacteria will begin to multiply. So, leave cold foods in the refrigerator until serving time. Keeping cold food serving dishes on ice or keep the cold food in insulated containers to help them stay nice and cold.

### **Step 7: Store Food Safely**

The second most inevitable aspect of Thanksgiving, beyond having a great feast, is leftovers! Don't let post-dinner drowsiness get in the way of food safety and packing up remaining food properly. Here are some safe leftover practices.

- Chill out. Your food first, and then you, later! Refrigerate uneaten food within two hours of cooking to prevent bacteria growth. Stop suggests storing leftovers in shallow containers to decrease cooling time and prevent food from spending too much time at unsafe temperatures (40 °F to 140 °F). *Pro tips:* cut turkey off the bone before refrigerating and store stuffing separately from the meat.
- BYOC (Bring Your Own Cooler). Thanksgiving means refrigerator space is at a premium. Anticipate little to no refrigerator space and bring a cooler from home. Even if you live in a cold climate, do not use the outdoors as a fridge since temperatures can fluctuate. The best way to keep extra food pathogen-free is in a packed cooler at a safe temperature (40°F or below).
- Leftovers last **safely for four days** in the refrigerator. For those who need a week before eating Thanksgiving again, pack food into airtight containers and freeze.
- **Sending guests home with leftovers?** If they will be traveling for more than two hours, give them ice or frozen gel packs to make sure the food in their coolers stays at or below 40°F.

### **Stop Foodborne Illness Is Here to Help You**

Stop Foodborne Illness is a national, nonprofit, public health organization dedicated to preventing illness and death from foodborne pathogens by promoting sound food safety policy and best practices, building public awareness and assisting those impacted by foodborne illness. For more food safety tips please visit [www.stopfoodborneillness.org/awareness/](http://www.stopfoodborneillness.org/awareness/). If you think you have been sickened from food, [check this out](#) and contact your local health professional.

For questions and personal assistance, please contact Stop Foodborne Illness' Community Coordinator, Stanley Rutledge, at [srutledge@stopfoodborneillness.org](mailto:srutledge@stopfoodborneillness.org) or 773-269-6555 x7. To donate to Stop, visit [here](#).