



USDA Photo

Turkey Basics: Safe Thawing

“The Big Thaw”

Turkeys must be kept at a safe temperature during “the big thaw.” While frozen, a turkey is safe indefinitely. However, as soon as it begins to thaw, any bacteria that may have been present before freezing can begin to grow again.

A package of frozen meat or poultry left thawing on the counter more than 2 hours is not at a safe temperature. Even though the center of the package may still be frozen, the outer layer of the food is in the “Danger Zone” between 40 and 140 °F — at a temperature where foodborne bacteria multiply rapidly.

There are three safe ways to thaw food: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave oven.

Safe Methods for Thawing

Immediately after grocery store checkout, take the frozen turkey home and store it in the freezer.

Frozen turkeys should not be left on the back porch, in the car trunk, in the basement, or any place else where temperatures cannot be constantly monitored.

Refrigerator Thawing

When thawing a turkey in the refrigerator:

- 1 Plan ahead: Allow approximately 24 hours for each 4 to 5 pounds in a refrigerator set at 40 °F or below.
- 2 Place the turkey in a container to prevent the juices from dripping on other foods.

Refrigerator Thawing Times

Whole turkey:

4 to 12 pounds.....1 to 3 days
12 to 16 pounds.....3 to 4 days
16 to 20 pounds.....4 to 5 days
20 to 24 pounds.....5 to 6 days

A thawed turkey can remain in the refrigerator for 1 or 2 days before cooking. *Foods thawed in the refrigerator can be refrozen without cooking but there may be some loss of quality.*

Cold Water Thawing

Allow about 30 minutes per pound.

First be sure the turkey is in a leak-proof plastic bag to prevent cross-contamination and to prevent the turkey from absorbing water, resulting in a watery product.

Submerge the wrapped turkey in cold tap water. Change the water every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed. Cook the turkey immediately after it is thawed.

Cold Water Thawing Times

4 to 12 pounds.....2 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

A turkey thawed by the cold water method should be cooked immediately. After cooking, meat from the turkey can be refrozen.

Microwave Thawing

Follow the microwave oven manufacturer’s instruction 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 wouldn’t have been destroyed.

A turkey thawed in the microwave must be cooked immediately.



Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)

Year-round Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish). Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day.

Send E-mail questions to MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov.

AskKaren.gov

For automated responses via the Internet 24 hours a day and a live chat during Hotline hours.

