

New safety recommendations set for turkey cooking

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The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service has updated poultry cooking recommendations this year, including the recommendation that the bird be cooked to an internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit, said Lynn Paul, Montana State University Extension food and nutrition specialist.

Paul, who urges everyone to buy and regularly use a meat thermometer to check internal meat temperatures, said that some older information and cookbooks may list different recommendations for poultry. However, chefs should be aware that 165 degrees F is the new recommendation, chosen to reduce food borne illness risks.

In addition, Paul recommends the following food safety tips from the USDA to prevent inviting bacteria to your holiday table:

Keep turkey frozen until ready to use. Thawing a frozen turkey takes a long time, so plan ahead. To thaw in the refrigerator, keep in original wrapper and place the frozen turkey on a tray so that drippings will not get onto other foods. It takes about 24 hours for every 4 pounds of turkey to defrost in the refrigerator. So a 4 to 12 pound bird would take one to three days; a 12 to 16 pound bird about three to four days; for 16 to 20 pound bird between four and five days; and a 20 to 24 pound bird between five and six days.

To thaw in cold water, be sure your sink is clean. Make sure the turkey is in a leak-proof package so the water does not leak through to the

wrapping. Fill sink with cold water until the wrapped turkey is submerged. Change the water every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed. Using this cold-water method, a 4 to 12 pound bird would take two to six hours; for 12 to 16 pounds six-to-eight hours; for 16 to 20 pounds about eight to 10 hours; for 20 to 24 pounds 10 to 12 hours. Cook turkey immediately after thawing.

Keep everything clean. If the surface isn't clean, bacteria that were on the raw turkey could get onto the cooked turkey or other foods and cause illness. Use hot water and soap to wash hands, sink, counters and anything else that has touched the raw turkey or had turkey juice on it. A bleach solution can be used to disinfect.

For optimal stuffing safety, stuffing a turkey is not recommended. Instead, cook stuffing outside the bird to a safe internal temperature of 165 degrees F. If you choose to stuff your turkey, fill the cavities loosely and make sure the internal temperature of the stuffing reaches 165 degrees F.

When you roast a turkey, set oven temperature to 325 degrees. Do not cook turkey on a lower temperature and never cook it part way one day and finish the next.

The best way to know if the turkey is done is to use a meat thermometer. The temperature should reach 165 degrees in the thickest part of the breast.

To serve the turkey, let it cool for 15 minutes to make slicing easier. Do not let it stay at room temperature for more than two hours. Do not eat foods that have remained at room temperature for more than two hours.

Divide leftovers into small, shallow containers and refrigerate or freeze. Cooked turkey and stuffing generally keeps three to four days in the

refrigerator and two to six months frozen. Reheat leftovers to 165 degrees F.

Safe food handling fact sheets from the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service are available at www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact%5FSheets/

Source: Montana State University

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