

Gathering again? Tips for a safe and healthy Thanksgiving

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For families who settled for smaller gatherings and remote blessings during the height of the pandemic, this Thanksgiving looks like the return of the big bash.

More folks are getting together this year, with the American Automobile Association predicting holiday travel will be nearly back to prepandemic levels.

If that's the case at your house, it may have been a while since you faced a frozen turkey or remembered which cousins shouldn't sit together.

To help you brush up on the holiday basics, here are some tips to keep everyone safe, healthy and sane:

FIRST, THE TURKEY

The big bird is the center of most Thanksgiving meals, but it's important to handle raw poultry properly to avoid spreading bacteria that can send your guests home with an unwanted side of food poisoning. Thaw safely. A frozen turkey needs about 24 hours to thaw for every 4 to 5 pounds of weight, according to the Agriculture Department. In a pinch, it can be thawed in a cold water bath or even a microwave, but it must be cooked immediately if you use those methods. And don't wash the turkey. It's a bad idea to rinse it in the sink, a practice that can spread potentially dangerous germs like salmonella to nearby areas, said Jennifer Quinlan, a Drexel University nutrition sciences professor who has studied [consumers' turkey-handling habits](#). Instead, pat the turkey dry with [paper towels](#) and plop it in the roasting pan.

COOK THOROUGHLY, REFRIGERATE PROMPTLY

The best way to make sure your turkey is fully cooked, to an [internal temperature](#) of 165 degrees Fahrenheit, is to use a meat thermometer, said Lisa Shelley, who researches food safety at North Carolina State University. Don't rely on golden-brown skin or the color of the turkey juices. Once the turkey is served, be sure to refrigerate it and all the other leftovers—mashed potatoes, gravy, yams—within two hours.

"Really, set a timer when you put everything out," suggested Quinlan. "You'll be surprised at how fast two hours goes."

And don't skimp on the cleanup. Wash your hands before preparing food and after touching raw poultry. But make sure to consider the counters, the cutting boards and any tools that may be contaminated, too, said Shelley. Clean with soap and water, then sanitize with chlorine bleach. "It's a [two-step process](#)," she said.

DANGER ZONES

Certain holidays are known for specific injuries and Thanksgiving's no exception, said Dr. Christopher Kang, president of the American College of Emergency Physicians. Carve carefully. Slicing a turkey is a lot harder than it looks, as Turkey Day injuries attest. "Always, with any cutting and carving, we see a lot of hand injuries and finger injuries," said Kang, an ER doctor in Tacoma, Washington. Make sure the carving knife is sharp and never slice toward yourself, always away. Don't put your hand under the blade to catch a slice of meat.

Beware, turkey fryer fires. Deep-fried turkey may sound delectable, but it's a dangerous dish for home cooks to prepare. The fryers can tip over and spill—and the combination of a frozen or not-quite-thawed turkey and hot oil can create an explosion. Even when that doesn't happen, Kang said he's seen plenty of painful scalding injuries caused by hot oil.

AVOID THE "TRIPLE-DEMIC"

Thanksgiving gatherings also kick off a spike in other ER visits as generations gather and swap germs. This year, [the danger posed by COVID-19 and other viruses](#), including an early flu season and RSV, [respiratory syncytial virus](#), is a continuing worry, Kang said. Babies and [young children](#) are particularly vulnerable to some infections; older

people are more susceptible to others. "What age group is not at risk?" Kang said. To reduce the chances of infection and serious illness, make sure everyone eligible is up-to-date on vaccinations. Ask folks who have any symptoms of illness—even "allergies" or "just a cold"—to stay home. Consider asking guests to take a rapid COVID-19 test before they show up. Make sure your home is well-ventilated: Open windows, keep a portable air purifier running. To protect the most vulnerable guests, consider wearing masks indoors.

BE MINDFUL OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Hosting—or joining—a Thanksgiving holiday event after nearly three years of a tumultuous pandemic may be a challenge. It's important to have realistic expectations—and to plan ahead to avoid familiar family pitfalls, according to the American Psychological Association. Take time for yourself. Despite the pressure of the holidays, don't forgo your healthy routine. If you usually exercise, make time for a long walk, APA experts say: "Reflect on aspects of your life that give you joy." Set boundaries in advance. If you're worried about conflicts or heated discussions at your holiday table, the APA suggests making sure everyone knows Thanksgiving is a time to focus on "gratitude, appreciation and all you have, including each other."

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