

Food Safety Tips for the Holiday Season¹

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Food is always an important part of holiday festivities, but holiday meals can take a turn for the worse if food safety is not properly practiced when preparing and cooking the food. The food you serve your family and friends can make them ill if your turkey, ham, or home-prepared meat products are not properly handled. The good news is that, by practicing basic food safety measures, you can help prevent foodborne illness over the holiday season. This factsheet provides information about safe food practices for the holidays.

Why is holiday food safety important?

Food is an important part of holiday celebrations, but cooking more food than you normally prepare can easily lead to a food safety incident. During the holiday season, you have family and friends visiting and you need to cook food in excess of your everyday needs. Cooking larger batches of food often can result in undercooking. Food for holiday meals typically is prepared ahead for gatherings, and such items need to be reheated or stored properly. You also may cook a variety of dishes at the same time for a holiday feast, and when things get complicated, errors can occur. Furthermore, big holiday meals can result in lots of leftovers, which can lead to food safety problems unless they are stored properly.

Social gatherings also affect holiday food safety. During the holiday season, you share your holiday meals with family members and friends, which might include a group of

people considered “high risk” for contracting foodborne illness: infants, young children, older adults, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems due to disease or medical treatment. When you share your food with more people, any contaminated food will affect more people, leading to a potential outbreak of foodborne illness.

Additionally, people send and receive many food gifts by mail during the holiday season. Since some of these items are perishable, you need to take care of them with good planning to avoid any foodborne illness.

What is the best practice in planning and shopping for a holiday meal?

When preparing for your special holiday meal, it is best to plan early. Finding out the number of guests and their dietary restrictions in advance will help you decide on the menu and minimize any food waste.

1. Planning

Invite guests and ask them to RSVP before the event date so you will know how much food you need to purchase. Ask your guests about any special dietary requirements or food allergies when you invite them. Based on their responses, decide on the menu and collect recipes. Calculate the cooking time and temperatures for your menu and decide the cooking order. It will be helpful to select a few recipes

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that can be served safely at room temperature to avoid an overloaded oven. Check your oven thermometer to make sure it is working properly.

2. Shopping

Before shopping, check the ingredients you have at home and verify their expiration date. It is helpful to prepare a shopping list before going shopping. Make sure you have sufficient room in your refrigerator for all purchased food items. Hardy vegetables such as onions, carrots, and potatoes can be purchased one week ahead; however, salad greens and perishable vegetable should not be purchased until the day before. While shopping, keep raw meat, poultry, and seafood away from other foods in your grocery cart. Placing raw meat, poultry, and seafood in plastic bags can be a good method to separate them from other foods. Cold foods that need refrigeration or freezing should be purchased last. Ask a cashier to place your raw meat, poultry, and seafood in a separate bag. It is recommended that shoppers bring insulated bags or coolers filled with ice or ice packs, especially if they need to make a stop before heading home.

How can we prepare and cook holiday meals safely?

Whether you cook your daily meal for your family of four or you prepare a big holiday meal for a group of twenty, you can always ensure the safety of foods that you are cooking by following four simple golden rules: clean, separate, cook, and chill.

1. Clean

You need to wash your hands and clean food contact surfaces before, during, and after cooking, and wash produce appropriately before consumption/preparation. First, wash your hands with warm water and soap vigorously for 20 seconds before and after handling any food. Keep in mind that hand sanitizer is not a replacement for washing hands with soap and water because it is not effective against certain pathogens (microorganisms that can cause illnesses to a host), including most viruses. Second, wash food-contact surfaces, including cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and countertops, with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item. Rinse fruits and vegetables thoroughly under cool running water and use a produce brush to remove surface dirt, especially from fruits and vegetables with rough surfaces such as cantaloupe. Do not rinse raw meat and poultry before cooking to avoid spreading bacteria to areas around the sink and countertops.

2. Separate

When you prepare meals or store food in the refrigerator, be sure to keep foods that will not be cooked (ready-to-eat foods) separate from items that can contaminate other foods, such as raw meat, poultry, seafood, or eggs. Be sure to use separate kitchen utensils for ready-to-eat foods and for your raw products. Also, consider using one cutting board only for foods that will be cooked, such as raw meat, poultry, and seafood, and another one for those that will not (such as raw fruits and vegetables). Do not put cooked meat or other ready-to-eat food on an unwashed plate that has held any raw eggs, meat, poultry, seafood, or their juices.

3. Cook

Cook meat and poultry to a safe minimum internal temperature (Table 1). Use a food thermometer to measure the internal temperature. Some traditional holiday foods present particular hazards. If chitterlings (pig’s small intestines) are on your menu, boil the chitterlings for 5 minutes *before* cleaning and preparing them. To ensure your turkey is cooked properly, insert a food thermometer into the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. The turkey is safe when the temperature in all locations reaches 165°F. If the turkey is stuffed, the temperature of the stuffing should be 165°F.

Table 1. Safe minimum internal temperatures.*

All poultry, stuffing, and casseroles	165°F
Ground meats, eggs, and egg dishes	160°F
Beef, pork, lamb, and veal (steaks, roasts, and chops)** Fresh or smoked ham (uncooked)** Fish and shellfish	145°F
Fully cooked ham (to reheat)***	140°F
Reheating leftovers	165°F
*Modified from Safe Minimum Internal Temperature Chart (USDA FSIS 2020a).	
**Allow to rest for three minutes.	
***Hams that are packaged in USDA-inspected plants.	

Vegetarian and vegan dishes also pose food safety risks, so ensure those cooked meals and additions reach the proper temperature as well. Bring sauces, soups, and gravies to a rolling boil when reheating. A rolling boil is when a liquid is boiled rapidly with lots of bubbling. Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm. When making your own eggnog or other recipe calling for raw eggs, such as custard or key lime pie, use pasteurized shell eggs, liquid or frozen pasteurized egg products, or powdered egg whites. Be sure that eggs and products containing eggs are thoroughly cooked when serving those at higher risk for foodborne illness. Do not

eat uncooked cookie dough, since it may contain raw eggs that have a risk of containing pathogens like *Salmonella*.

4. Chill

Refrigerate leftovers and any food products that are stored cold within two hours, because harmful bacteria grow rapidly at room temperature. Set your refrigerator at or below 40°F and the freezer at 0°F. Check both periodically with an accurate appliance thermometer.

Thaw frozen food safely in the refrigerator, under cold running water, or in the microwave, but never at room temperature. If you thaw food in cold water or in the microwave, this food needs to be cooked immediately. When you thaw food, allow enough time to properly handle the food. For example, a 20-pound turkey needs four to five days to thaw completely in the refrigerator. Leftovers should be promptly refrigerated (within two hours) and used within three to four days. Some leftovers can be frozen; always remember to label and date the item before storage. Do not taste food that looks or smells questionable. **When in doubt, throw it out!**

What is the best practice for the safety of mail-order food?

With convenience becoming more important in shopping, mail-order foods that are delivered to the home are gaining popularity as the ultimate time-saver. Sending food gifts through mail is also a popular holiday tradition. However, ordering food through the mail may cause concerns about food safety, especially if the food is perishable. It is important to understand how food and packaging should look when you send or receive mail-order foods. Keep in mind that mail order foods must be handled carefully and in a timely manner to prevent foodborne illness.

If you send a food gift to someone, make sure the shipping company sends perishable food items cold or frozen and properly packed with a cold source such as an ice pack or dry ice. Overnight delivery option is the most preferable when sending perishable food items.

When you mail homemade food yourself, make sure perishable foods are not held at temperatures between 40°F and 140°F, the so-called “Danger Zone,” for longer than two hours. Harmful bacteria can grow rapidly in the “Danger Zone,” but they may not affect the taste, smell, or appearance of a food. In other words, you cannot tell that a food has been mishandled or is unsafe to eat. Make sure your perishable items are packed properly by creating “miniature

deep-freezing packaging” using dry ice and reusable insulated coolers (Figure 1).

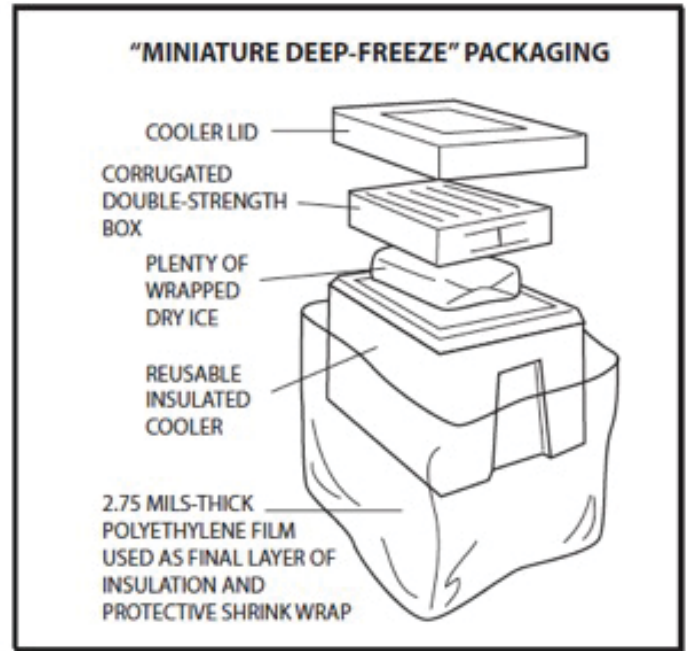


Figure 1. Miniature deep-freeze.
Credits: USDA FSIS 2015

Even though everyone likes to surprise their family and friends with gifts during holidays, it is not the best practice when you mail food as a gift. Tell the recipient a delivery date if the company has promised one or forward the package tracking information. If none of those are available, alert the recipient that “the gift is in the mail” so someone can be there to receive it. Do not have a perishable item delivered to an office, since it could get delivered after the recipient leaves or refrigerator space for keeping it cold might not be available.

When you receive an item, make sure the company sends perishable items like meat or poultry cold or frozen and packed with a cold source, such as dry ice or an ice pack. Items should be packed in foam or heavy corrugated cardboard. The food should be delivered as quickly as possible, ideally overnight. The outer package of the perishable items should be labeled “Keep Refrigerated” to alert the recipient. When you receive a food item marked “Keep Refrigerated,” open it immediately and check its temperature. The food should arrive frozen or partially frozen, with ice crystals still visible or at least refrigerator cold (below 40°F as measured with a food thermometer). Even if a product is smoked, cured, vacuum-packed, or fully cooked, it still is a perishable product and must be kept cold. If perishable food arrives warm (above 40°F as measured with a food thermometer), notify the company. Do not consume the suspect food.

How should I cook turkey safely for the holiday season?

Holidays would not be perfect without a big oven-roasted turkey. However, to cook a turkey safely, you need to make a good plan from thawing to roasting.

1. Thawing

Turkey must be kept at a safe temperature during “the big thaw”. While frozen, a turkey is safe for a long time (it can be stored for up to a year without affecting quality or safety). 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 for more than two hours is not safe anymore. 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, which is a temperature zone where foodborne bacteria multiply rapidly. There are three safe ways to thaw food: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in a microwave oven (USDA FSIS 2020b).

When thawing a turkey in the refrigerator, you need to plan ahead for adequate space and timing. Allow approximately 24 hours for each 4–5 pounds in a refrigerator set at 40°F or below (Table 2) (USDA FSIS 2020a). Place the turkey in a container to prevent the juices from dripping on other foods. A completely thawed turkey can remain in the refrigerator for 1–2 days before cooking. If necessary, turkey thawed in the refrigerator may be refrozen.

When thawing a turkey in cold water, allow about 30 minutes per pound (Table 2) (USDA FSIS 2020a). 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. Do not refreeze.

To thaw a turkey in a microwave oven, follow the oven manufacturer’s instruction for the required minutes per pound and power level to use for thawing (MDH 2011). Place turkey in a microwave-safe container to catch any juices that may leak. Plan to cook it immediately after thawing because some areas of the food may become warm and begin to cook during microwaving. Keeping partially cooked food is not recommended because any bacteria that have not been destroyed can grow rapidly in the food.

2. Stuffing

For optimal safety and uniform cooking, it is best to cook stuffing separately. However, if you are cooking a stuffed turkey, it is essential to use a food thermometer to make sure the center of the stuffing reaches a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F. Cooking a home-stuffed turkey is riskier than cooking one not stuffed. Even if the turkey itself has reached the safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F, the stuffing may not have reached a temperature high enough to destroy bacteria that may be present. Bacteria can survive in stuffing that has not reached 165°F, possibly resulting in foodborne illness.

If you plan to prepare stuffing using raw meat, poultry, or shellfish, you should cook these ingredients before stuffing the turkey to reduce the risk of foodborne illness from bacteria that may be found in raw ingredients. The wet ingredients for stuffing can be prepared ahead of time and refrigerated. However, do not mix wet and dry ingredients until just before spooning the stuffing mixture into the turkey cavity. Stuff the turkey loosely (about 3/4 cup of stuffing per pound). The stuffing should be moist, not dry, because moist heat destroys bacteria more rapidly. Immediately place the stuffed, raw turkey in an oven set no lower than 325°F.

Once your turkey is finished cooking, remove the stuffing, place it in a separate baking pan, and while your turkey is resting prior to carving, heat your stuffing in a 350°F oven cooking until it reaches the 165°F temperature needed to ensure safety.

3. Roasting

Set the oven temperature no lower than 325°F. Table 3 shows roasting times of stuffed or unstuffed turkeys based on their size. Before roasting, make sure the turkey is completely thawed. Times are based on fresh or thawed birds at a refrigerator temperature of 40°F or below. Place turkey breast-side up on a flat wire rack in a shallow roasting pan 2 to 2 ½ inches deep. Optionally, you can add ½ cup water to the bottom of the pan.

A tent of aluminum foil may be placed loosely over the breast of the turkey for the first 1 to 1 ½ hours and then removed for browning. A tent of foil may be placed over the turkey after the turkey has reached the desired golden brown color. The temperature of the turkey and the center of the stuffing must reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F when measured with a food thermometer. Check the temperature in the innermost part of the thigh

and wing and the thickest part of the breast. Do not remove the stuffing from the turkey before it reaches 165°F, because the undercooked stuffing could contaminate the cooked meat. Let the cooked turkey stand 20 minutes before removing stuffing and carving. Refrigerate cooked poultry and stuffing within 2 hours. Leftovers should be reheated to a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F and used within 3 to 4 days.

¹ While the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) still defines the temperature “Danger Zone” as 40°F to 140°F (USDA FSIS 2017), the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Food Code defines the “Danger Zone” as 41°F to 135°F (FDA 2017).

How should I make eggnog safely?

Homemade eggnog often is consumed during the holiday season. This creamy drink, however, may cause *Salmonella* infection if raw or undercooked eggs are used. To prevent this holiday drink from causing any harmful infection, it is important to follow safe food handling practices (Brandt and Driessen, 2018).

Eggs are one of the main ingredients in most eggnog recipes, giving the beverage its characteristic frothy texture. The FDA advises consumers to start with a cooked egg base for homemade eggnog, ice cream, or mayonnaise. This is especially important when you serve people at high risk for foodborne illness. To make a cooked egg base, combine eggs and half the milk as indicated in the recipe and cook the mixture to an internal temperature of 160°F with constant stirring. The cooking will destroy *Salmonella* and other pathogens, if present. After cooking, chill the mixture before adding the rest of the milk and other ingredients. You can also use egg-substitute products or pasteurized eggs in your eggnog, or you can find a recipe without eggs.

How should I store leftovers safely?

When you cook large batches of food for holiday meals, you often have leftovers even with careful meal planning. Leftover food can be a quick and convenient next meal, but it is important to ensure it is safe to eat. There are guidelines for safe handling leftovers:

1. Refrigeration and Freezing

As harmful bacteria can rapidly grow in the temperature danger zone (between 40°F and 140°F), any leftover food should be refrigerated within 2 hours or preparation. To

cook quickly, use shallow containers, and divide large amounts of food into multiple portions. For example, divide a big pot of soup into multiple smaller containers, and cut turkey or whole roasts into smaller pieces so they will cool quickly. When you store leftovers, store them in airtight packaging or seal them appropriately. This practice can help keep bacteria out and prevent leftovers from picking up undesirable odors in the refrigerator. To store leftovers for longer terms, freeze them rather than refrigerate. Refrigerated leftovers should be used within 3–4 days. Frozen foods can be stored safely indefinitely, but it is best to consume them within 3–4 months as they can lose moisture and flavor when stored for longer times (Foodsafety.gov 2021).

2. Thawing

There are three safe ways to thaw frozen leftovers: a refrigerator, cold water, and a microwave oven. Refrigeration takes the longest time but it can keep leftovers safe during thawing. Once thawed, leftovers should be consumed within 3–4 days or be refrozen. Cold water thawing is faster than refrigeration, but it requires careful attention. The frozen leftovers to be thawed should be in a leak-proof package or bag. If not, water can get into the food, and when it happens, bacteria from the surrounding environment can enter the food as well. Foods thawed by cold water should be immediately cooked. Another way to safely thaw the frozen leftovers is microwave thawing. It is the fastest method, but tends to heat the food unevenly. Arrange food items evenly and add some liquid if needed. Always use a microwave-safe container.

3. Reheating

When reheating leftovers, make sure the internal temperature reaches 165°F as measured with a food thermometer. When you reheat sauces, soups, or gravies, bring them to a rolling boil. Cover leftovers while reheating, as a cover can help retain moisture and ensure that food is heated all the way through. When using the microwave oven for reheating, rotate the food for even heating. Arrange food items evenly in a microwave-safe dish, and add liquid if needed. Since microwaves have cold spots, allow a resting time and check the internal temperature of food in several places with a food thermometer.

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Other Resources

Fight BAC!® - Partnership for Food Safety Education: Glorious goodies to send and receive. 2021. <https://www.fightbac.org/glorious-goodies-to-send-and-receive/>

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Table 2. Time needed to thaw turkey.

Turkey Size	Time in Refrigerator (approximately 24 hrs for every 4–5 lbs)	Cold Water (approximately 30 min per lb)
4 to 12 pounds	1 to 3 days	2 to 6 hours
12 to 16 pounds	3 to 4 days	6 to 8 hours
16 to 20 pounds	4 to 5 days	8 to 10 hours
20 to 24 pounds	5 to 6 days	10 to 12 hours
*Modified from Turkey Thawing Chart (USDA FSIS 2020b).		

Table 3. Roasting time to safely cook turkey.*,**

Turkey Size	Unstuffed	Stuffed
4 to 6 pounds (breast)	1½ to 2¼ hours	Not usually applicable
6 to 8 pounds (breast)	2¼ to 3¼ hours	Not usually applicable
8 to 12 pounds	2¾ to 3 hours	3 to 3½ hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 to 3¾ hours	3½ to 4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	3¾ to 4¼ hours	4 to 4¼ hours
18 to 20 pounds	4¼ to 4½ hours	4¼ to 4¾ hours
20 to 24 pounds	4½ to 5 hours	4¾ to 5¼ hours
*Modified from Turkey Roasting Chart (USDA FSIS 2019).		
**Set oven to a minimum of 325°F.		