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Release Date: November 6, 2017

The holidays will soon be upon us, and as we prepare for our family and friends and all those delicious holiday meals, we need to keep safe food handling procedures in mind. Thanksgiving is not only a time to be thankful for all we have been blessed with during the year but traditionally Americans serve a meal with family favorites and a turkey is most often at the center of the table.

The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service has many resources available related to safely handling your turkey while preparing, serving and storing leftovers. Let's start with preparing your turkey for roasting.

The most common ways to purchase a turkey are fresh or frozen. Fresh turkeys can be stored in the refrigerator for 1 to 2 days before cooking and should be prepared and served after no more than 2 days. Frozen turkeys should be thawed one of three ways: in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave oven.

Thawing a turkey in the refrigerator depends on the size of the bird. The chart includes the size of the bird and the length of time needed to thaw in a refrigerator set at 40⁰ or below.

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

Thawing in cold water will be faster but more care must be taken. The turkey should be securely wrapped so no water seeps through to the bird. Cold water must be used and changed every 30 minutes and the turkey must be cooked immediately after it is thawed. During this process the meat has a greater chance of being mishandled and bacterial growth may begin to occur. The thawing process may take from 2 hours for a 4 pound bird to 12 hours for a 24 pound bird to be completed. Not many people want to be up for 12 hours thawing their turkey before beginning the cooking process.

The last method is to thaw using the microwave oven. This method also requires the turkey to be cooked as soon as it is thawed, as the thawing process may have caused cooking to begin. A

turkey thawed using this method should not be refrozen or stored before cooking begins. Follow microwave oven directions, unwrap the turkey, place in a microwave-safe dish to catch any juices.

Now that your turkey is thawed there are a few guidelines to follow to safely cook your turkey.

- Use oven temperature no lower than 325⁰F to assure proper cooking temperature
- Stuffing the turkey is not recommended, place stuffing in a casserole dish to bake
- Tuck under wing tips
- Add ½ cup water to shallow pan
- Drape with aluminum foil to prevent over browning
- When using an oven cooking bag follow manufacturer's directions
- Always wash hands, utensils, sink and anything else that may come into contact with raw poultry or it's juices with soap and water to prevent cross contamination
- Cook to internal temperature of 165⁰ using a meat thermometer to test for accuracy
- Let turkey stand for 20 minutes after removing from oven for easier carving

When serving your meal only leave at room temperature for two hours. Proper storage of leftovers should include small portions in containers that are shallow to allow quicker cooling, only storing for 3 to 4 days in the refrigerator and 2 to 6 months in freezer for best quality.

Following these simple steps, using caution when handling raw poultry, properly cooking your turkey, and safely storing leftovers should allow you to have a safe and enjoyable holiday meal with your family and friends.

More information may be obtained using the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service website at: www.fsis.usda.gov

Or if you have any questions or want more information please contact: the MSU Extension Office, BHC at 406-665-9770 or stop by 317 N. Custer Ave. in Hardin.

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