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For Better Living
Turkey Cooking Techniques

There are literally hundreds of ways to cook a turkey and each year new recipes and techniques are created based on trendy regional ingredients and creative cooking methods. Some are good, some are bad, and some are downright unsafe. All are designed to tantalize the senses and produce the perfect turkey - moist breast meat, tender legs and thighs, golden brown skin and memorable flavor.

The greatest challenge for new and experienced cooks alike is to avoid the dreaded "dry turkey," which is usually in reference to the white meat of the turkey breast. Because the flavor of turkey marries well with a host of ingredients, turkey can be successfully braised, roasted, grilled, fried, boiled, broiled, barbecued and so on.

Believe it or not, cooking a turkey is not that difficult. Which turkey cooking method chosen is up to the cook, just make sure it is a safe method.

Wash hands, utensils, sink and anything else that has come in contact with the raw turkey with hot, soapy water immediately following preparation.

Traditional Roast Turkey (unstuffed)

1. Preheat oven to 325°F. Check the wrapper to see how much the turkey weighs and determine approximate cooking time (see chart below). Remove the giblet bag and the neck from the turkey cavity. Wash the turkey inside and out and pat skin dry with paper towels.
2. Place turkey breast side up on a rack in a shallow (about 2 inches deep) roasting pan. Insert meat thermometer in thigh. Add 1/2 cup water to the bottom of pan, if desired.
3. Cover turkey loosely with a tent of heavy-duty aluminum foil. Roast the turkey until temperature in the innermost part of the thigh reaches 165°F as measured with a food thermometer. Check the wing and the thickest part of the breast. You may choose to cook the turkey to higher temperatures. Cooking time will vary. For example, a 20 pound turkey will take 4 1/4 to 5 hours to cook, check the temperature on the thermometer after 4 1/4 hours.
4. Meanwhile, mix the stuffing or dressing. Place in a casserole and pop it into the oven during the last hour or so of roasting time.
5. Remove the foil tent after 1 to 1 1/2 hours of cooking time to brown the skin. Brush with vegetable oil to enhance browning, if desired.
6. A whole turkey (and turkey parts) is safe when cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer. Check the internal temperature in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. For reasons of personal preference, consumers may choose to cook turkey to higher temperatures.

7. Allow the turkey to set 20 to 30 minutes before carving to allow juices to saturate the meat evenly.

Note: Cooking times do vary. Why? There are many reasons - oven temperature may not be completely accurate, the turkey may be very cold or partially frozen, and/or the roasting pan may be too small which inhibits the flow of heat. The USDA highly recommends use of a meat thermometer to determine doneness of turkey.

USDA Roasting Timetable for Fresh or Thawed Turkey at 325°F.

These times are approximate and should always be used in conjunction with a properly placed thermometer.

Unstuffed

8 to 12 pounds	2 3/4 to 3 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 to 3 3/4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	3 3/4 to 4 1/4 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4 1/4 to 4 1/2 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4 1/2 to 5 hours

▶ The USDA does not recommend cooking turkey in an oven set lower than 325°F.

Oven Cooking Bag Method

Preparing a turkey in an oven cooking bag can be a safe and a delicious alternative to the traditional roasting method. In this technique, a large heat tempered plastic cooking bag especially designed for oven temperatures is used. Bags can be purchased in the paper goods section of most grocery stores. Instructions for use are printed on the box.

When using an oven-cooking bag, preheat the oven to 350°F. To prevent bursting, a tablespoon of dry flour is shaken around to coat the empty bag and slits are cut in the bag to allow steam to escape. The pan holding the turkey in the bag must be large enough so the bag does not hang over the sides. Allow ample space for the bag to expand during cooking so that it does not touch the top or sides of the oven or it will melt.

This method produces a moist-heat cooking environment. Use a meat thermometer inserted right through the plastic into the innermost part of the thigh. A whole turkey is safe when cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer. Check the internal temperature in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. For reasons of personal preference, you may choose to cook the turkey to higher temperatures.

Aluminum Foil Wrapped Method

Wrapping and cooking the entire turkey in aluminum foil requires increased oven temperature to ensure safety. Preheat the oven to 450°F. This method actually steams the turkey in its own juices. It produces a moist bird with a light golden, non-crisp skin. The cooking time is reduced due to higher temperatures and the trapped steam inside the foil.

Brush the turkey with melted butter, vegetable oil or margarine. Tear off a piece of 18 inch wide heavy-duty aluminum foil that is 3 times longer than the turkey. Place the turkey lengthwise in the middle of the foil, breast side up. Bring the foil ends up overlapping the turkey. Insert the meat thermometer through the foil into the thickest part of the thigh.

Place turkey in a shallow roasting pan and bring sides of foil up around turkey. Do not make an airtight seal. To brown turkey: open foil during last 30 minutes of cooking.

Roast until meat thermometer inserted in the innermost part of the thigh reads 165°F. Check the temperature in the thickest part of the breast and the wing as well. Temperature in all areas should be 165°F or higher. Broth may accumulate in the foil during cooking. Reserve this flavorful broth for moistening stuffing or for making giblet gravy. Cooking time can be reduced by as much as 30 minutes to an hour compared to traditional roasting timetable.

Microwave Oven Method

Cooking a whole, stuffed turkey in the microwave oven is not recommended. Full size microwave (650 to 700 watts) ovens can usually accommodate a small turkey (8 to 10 pounds), turkey breast or boneless turkey roll. Make sure the turkey is fully thawed as microwave thawing followed by microwave cooking creates uneven cooking.

A whole turkey takes 7 to 9 minutes per pound at 50 percent power and rotating the dish every 15 minutes. Consider using an oven-cooking bag to ensure even cooking. A turkey roll or boneless turkey breast can be cooked using the microwave probe. Follow manual directions for monitoring temperature with a probe.

Since metal thermometers cannot be used during microwave cooking; check doneness when cooking is finished by inserting an instant read thermometer in several different areas of the turkey. The whole turkey is done when the temperature in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and thickest part of the breast reaches 165°F.

If you have further questions contact the USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-674-6854 TDY 800-246-7072 or send Email to: mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov.

To talk to a food safety specialist call 1-888-674-6854 between 10 am and 4 pm eastern time and on Thanksgiving Day 10 to 2 pm eastern time.

Sources: University of Illinois Extension; U.S. Department of Agriculture