

USDA Provides Tips and Resources for a Bacteria-Free Thanksgiving

Food Safety Education Staff Press (202) 720-9113 Consumer Inquiries (888) 674-6854

WASHINGTON, Nov. 21, 2017 — More than 45 million turkeys are eaten on Thanksgiving Day, with a never-ending list of side dishes and desserts. The Thanksgiving meal is by far the largest and most stressful meal many consumers prepare all year, leaving room for mistakes that can make guests sick. But never fear, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is available with tips and resources to make this Thanksgiving safe and stress-free.

“Turkey and other meat and poultry may contain *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* that can lead to serious foodborne illness,” said acting FSIS Administrator Paul Kiecker. “By properly handling and cooking your turkey, you can avoid these harmful pathogens and ensure your family has a safe and healthy Thanksgiving feast.”

Begin by following these five steps:

Wash your hands, but not your turkey

Washing your hands before cooking is the simplest way to stop the spread of bacteria, while washing your turkey is the easiest way to spread bacteria all over your kitchen. According to the 2016 Food and Drug Administration Food Safety Survey, 68 percent of consumers wash poultry in the kitchen sink, which is not recommended by the USDA. Research shows that washing meat or poultry can splash bacteria around your kitchen by up to 3 feet, contaminating countertops, towels and other food. Washing doesn't remove bacteria from the bird. Only cooking the turkey to the correct internal temperature will ensure all bacteria are killed.

The exception to this rule is brining. When rinsing brine off of a turkey, be sure to remove all other food or objects from the sink, layer the area with paper towels and use a slow stream of water to avoid splashing.

To stuff or not to stuff

For optimal food safety, do not stuff the turkey. Even if the turkey is cooked to the correct internal temperature, the stuffing inside may not have reached a temperature high enough to kill the bacteria. It is best to cook the stuffing in a separate dish.

Take the temperature of the bird

Although there are various ways to cook a turkey, the only way to avoid foodborne illness is to make sure it is cooked to the correct internal temperature as measured by a food thermometer. Take the bird's temperature in three areas — the thickest part of the breast, the innermost part of the wing and the innermost part of the thigh — make sure all three locations reach 165°F. If one of those locations does not register at 165°F, then continue cooking until all three locations reach the correct internal temperature.

Follow the two-hour rule

Perishable foods should not be left on the table or countertops for longer than two hours. After two hours, food falls into the Danger Zone, temperatures between 40-140°F, where bacteria can rapidly multiply. If that food is then eaten, your guests could get sick. Cut turkey into smaller slices and refrigerate along with other perishable items, such as potatoes, gravy and vegetables. Leftovers should stay safe in the refrigerator for four days.

When in doubt call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline

If you have questions about your Thanksgiving dinner, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) to talk to a food safety expert. You can also chat live at AskKaren.gov, available from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET, Monday through Friday, in English and Spanish.

If you need help on Thanksgiving Day, the Meat and Poultry Hotline is available from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. ET.

Consumers with food safety questions can visit FoodSafety.gov to learn more about how to safely select, thaw and prepare a turkey. For more Thanksgiving food safety tips, follow FSIS on Twitter, [@USDAFoodSafety](https://twitter.com/USDAFoodSafety), or on Facebook, at [Facebook.com/FoodSafety.gov](https://www.facebook.com/FoodSafety.gov).