Food for Thought

November 2026

Turkey Tips



Safely storing, cooking, and serving your Thanksgiving turkey, will make your holiday celebration not only enjoyable, but safe for you and your family.

- **Be sure to give your turkey enough time to thaw.** Turkeys can be safely thawed in two ways: in the refrigerator or in cold water. A 12-pound turkey can take at least three days in the refrigerator to thaw. Bigger turkeys will take longer. **Never thaw a turkey at room temperature.** You may also thaw a turkey by putting the plastic wrapped bird in cold water. Change the water every 30 minutes to make sure the water stays cold. Thawed turkey can remain in the refrigerator for one to two days.

Size of Turkey	Thawing Time in Refrigerator (40°F) *Approximately 24 hours per 5 pounds (whole turkey)*	Thawing Time in Cold Water *Approximately 30 minutes per pound (whole turkey)* (Change water every ½ hour)
8-12 pounds	2-3 days	4-6 hours
12-16 pounds	3-4 days	6-8 hours
16-20 pounds	4-5 days	8-10 hours
20-24 pounds	5-6 days	10-12 hours

- **It is not recommended** to rinse your turkey as it can spread harmful bacteria in your kitchen due to the splatter. If you choose to rinse, clean your sink and the surrounding countertop with cleanser and sanitizer. Remember to remove the bag of giblets before cooking.

- **Roast!** Place your turkey in a shallow roasting pan. Add one inch of water to the pan and cover with aluminum foil. Roast in 325°F oven. Add more water if needed while cooking.

- **How long should I cook the turkey?**

Size of turkey	Cooking Time
8-12 pounds	2 ¾ - 3 hours
12-14 pounds	3 - 3 ¾ hours
14-18 pounds	3 ¾ - 4 ¼ hours
18-20 pounds	4 ¼ - 4 ½ hours
20-24 pounds	4 ½ - 5 hours

Call the toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline: 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) or FSIS website with food safety info: www.fsis.usda.gov
E-mail: MPHotline@usda.gov



Note: These cooking times are for an unstuffed turkey. For best results and food safety, cook the turkey and stuffing separately.

- **Never partially cook a turkey** and then refrigerate to finish cooking later. Bacteria can grow on the turkey and cause foodborne illness.

- **Use a thermometer.** The temperature should reach a minimum of 165°F in the thigh before removing it from the oven.

- **Storing leftovers.** De-bone turkey and refrigerate all leftovers in shallow containers within two hours of cooking. Use leftover turkey and stuffing within three to four days, gravy within one to two days, or freeze food in dated containers. For best quality, use frozen stuffing, turkey or gravy within four months. Thoroughly reheat refrigerated or frozen leftovers to a temperature of 165°F. Bones can be refrigerated or frozen and used to make broth for soup.

Thanksgiving Dinner Remade

Not sure what to do with your leftovers? Try these quick and easy leftover ideas:

Cranberry smoothies: Blend cranberries, frozen low-fat yogurt and orange juice.



Crunchy turkey salad: Toss cubed turkey, celery, apples, shredded spinach, and light mayo.

Stuffing frittata: Mix stuffing with egg and cook thoroughly, pancake-style.

Turkey berry wrap: Wrap sliced turkey, spread with cranberry sauce and shredded greens in a whole wheat tortilla.

Thanksgiving Casserole: Layer your leftovers (stuffing, turkey, green beans, mashed potatoes, gravy, and anything else) into a baking pan, bake, and enjoy!

Turkey Enchiladas/Fajitas/Tacos: Fill tortillas up with shredded turkey instead of chicken and add cheese and any other leftovers you think would be good in there!

Turkey Stuffed Bell Peppers: stuff your favorite color bell pepper with turkey, mashed potatoes, green beans, stuffing and shredded cheese.

Turkey Soup: Add turkey or other leftover vegetables to your favorite soup.

Pumpkin Parfait:
1 cup low-fat vanilla yogurt
1/2 teaspoon pumpkin pie spice
2-3 Tbsp pumpkin, canned
2 crushed graham cracker squares

Mix pumpkin spice with pumpkin. Layer ingredients in a glass or bowl. Serve immediately or refrigerate.

Eat Smart Idaho can help you learn how to eat well for less. For Information on Eat Smart Idaho classes, contact the Eat Smart Idaho Administrator or Coordinator:

Shelly Johnson, MS, ESI Administrator
Email: sjohnson@uidaho.edu

Kali Gardiner, RD, LD, ESI Coordinator
Email: kalig@uidaho.edu

Phone: 208-292-2525
Website: www.eatsmartidaho.org

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Source: https://uwyoextension.org/uwnutrition/newsletters/10-ways-to-turn-your-thanksgiving-leftovers-into-planned-overs/; https://www.eatright.org/food/cultural-cuisines-and-traditions/holidays-and-celebrations/reinventing-thanksgiving; https://extension.umd.edu/programs/family-consumer-sciences/snap-ed/eat-smart/recipes/pumpkin-parfait retrieved 10/22/2026

This work and material is supported and funded by USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-SNAP and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture. USDA and University of Idaho are equal opportunity providers.