

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

State public health department promotes turkey tips for a safe Thanksgiving dinner *Safe food handling to make the holiday healthier and safer*

SPRINGFIELD – The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) is promoting food safety tips to use when preparing a Thanksgiving meal to help protect you and your family against food-related illness. Following some simple guidelines can help ensure a safe meal.

“Because food can be such a large part of the Thanksgiving holiday, we want to make sure food-related illness doesn’t ruin the day,” said IDPH Director Dr. Damon T. Arnold. “It’s important to make sure you properly thaw and cook your turkey to the appropriate temperature, otherwise you run the risk of becoming sick. Also make sure you wash, with soap and water, your hands, utensils and anything else that comes in contact with raw turkey and its juices to avoid illness.”

If you want to go with a fresh turkey, buy it no more than two days ahead of the big meal and make sure you have room to store it in the refrigerator. If you chose a frozen turkey, make sure the turkey is completely thawed either in the refrigerator or in cold water, changing the water every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed. Never defrost a turkey on the kitchen counter. To thaw in the refrigerator, allow approximately 24 hours per four to five pounds of turkey. The turkey should be placed on a tray or pan to catch any juices that may leak. A thawed turkey can remain in the refrigerator safely for one to two days. To thaw in cold water, allow 30 minutes defrosting time per pound of turkey. If the inner cavity is still frozen or even partially frozen when you put the turkey in the oven, the inside temperature will not be hot enough to destroy disease-causing bacteria.

Thawing Time in the Refrigerator

Size of Turkey Number of Days

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 Time in Cold Water

Size of Turkey Hours to Defrost

4 to 12 pounds 2 to 6 hours
12 to 16 pounds 6 to 8 hours
16 to 20 pounds 8 to 10 hours
20 to 24 pounds 10 to 12 hours

It’s safer to cook the stuffing separately, but if you do stuff the bird, do so just before cooking it and stuff it loosely so it cooks thoroughly. If stuffing is mixed the day before the meal, pre-mix only the dry ingredients. Mixing moist ingredients ahead of time allows bacteria the opportunity to grow.

Approximate Cooking Times for Turkey

(325 degree oven temperature)

Unstuffed

Size of Turkey Cooking Time

8 to 12 pounds 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 3 hours

12 to 14 pounds 3 to 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ hours

14 to 18 pounds 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ hours

18 to 20 pounds 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ to 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours

20 to 24 pounds 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 5 hours

Stuffed

Size of Turkey Cooking Time

8 to 12 pounds 3 to 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours

12 to 14 pounds 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 hours

14 to 18 pounds 4 to 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ hours

18 to 20 pounds 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ to 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ hours

20 to 24 pounds 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ hours

To check the temperature of the turkey, insert a meat thermometer into the center of the thickest part of the thigh, breast or stuffing. All turkey meat, including any that remains pink, is safe to eat as soon as all parts reach at least 165 degrees. The stuffing should also reach 165 degrees, whether it is cooked inside the bird or in a separate dish.

All leftovers need to be refrigerated immediately. If they are left to sit for several hours at room temperature, disease-causing bacteria can grow. Also, refrigerate stuffing and other leftovers separate from the bird.

When eating leftovers, they either need to be very cold (directly from the refrigerator) or very hot (at least 165 degrees F). Refrigerated turkey and stuffing should be used within three to four days and gravy within a day or two.