

## Holiday Food Safety & Reducing COVID-19 Risk

Thanksgiving is around the corner! Start thinking about food safety if you are planning to cook up a feast for family or friends, including proper thawing of the turkey, safe temperatures of food items and appropriate handling of leftovers. Along with food safety, you will also need to consider how to take part in the holiday while reducing the risk of spreading COVID-19.

Please review the [COVID-19 Guidance for Holiday Events and Gatherings](#) provided by Sacramento County [Public Health](#) and [Environmental Management](#) (EMD). It is strongly recommended that everyone integrate COVID-19 safety measures into their holiday plans, such as shopping, dining out, attending craft fairs, entertainment, light displays, and gatherings of friends and family. The following should be considered when deciding to participate in any activity:

1. Avoid large crowds
2. Wear face coverings while in indoor public spaces regardless of vaccinations status
3. Choose outdoor activities whenever possible
4. Avoid gatherings if you or a family member is at increased health risk for COVID-19 complications
5. Stay away if you or a family member is not feeling well or feels a bit “off” (tired or has a headache)
6. Know your risk when participating in holiday activities and consider safer, lower risk alternatives

Food safety measures will keep your feast from becoming contaminated with bacteria like salmonella, listeria and E. coli, which could make you, your guests and your family sick with a food-borne illness.

Sacramento County [EMD food safety specialists](#) and [Sacramento County Public Health](#) say improper preparation of meals and handling of leftovers can cause food-borne illness. It is important to always carefully handle raw turkey, be sure to not cross-contaminate surfaces and other foods, and to cook poultry/meats and other hot foods thoroughly to the appropriate temperatures.

“To help prevent foodborne illness when preparing and cooking poultry and vegetables, they should be handled separately with frequent hand-washing and thorough cleaning of surfaces and utensils that come into contact with raw meats – especially poultry. It’s also important to store leftovers correctly,” said, EMD Environmental Health Chief Jennea Monasterio.

To keep you and your loved ones safe when preparing a turkey, be aware of five important safety issues: thawing, preparing, stuffing, cooking to the proper temperature and handling of leftovers.

### #1 Thawing

Thawing your turkey in the refrigerator is the safest method because the turkey will defrost at a consistent, safe temperature. It will take 24 hours for every 5 pounds of weight for a turkey to thaw in the refrigerator. To thaw in cold water, submerge the bird in its original wrapper in cold tap water,

changing the water every 30 minutes. For instructions on microwave defrosting, refer to your microwave's owner's manual. Coldwater and microwave thawing can also be used if your bird did not entirely defrost in the refrigerator.

## **#2 Preparation**

As you prepare the turkey, bacteria present on raw poultry can contaminate your hands, utensils and work surfaces, which then can be transferred. After working with raw poultry, always wash utensils and work surfaces, as well as your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds before touching other foods. It is not recommended to wash your turkey as the bacteria from the splashed water can spread up to three feet away.

## **#3 Stuffing**

For optimal safety and consistent doneness, cook the stuffing outside the turkey in a casserole dish. However, if you place stuffing inside the turkey, do so just before cooking, and use a food thermometer. Make sure the center of the stuffing reaches a safe internal temperature of at least 165°F. Bacteria can survive in stuffing that has not reached 165°F, possibly resulting in foodborne illness.

## **#4 Cooking**

Before cooking, always thaw turkeys completely in the refrigerator. Set the oven temperature no lower than 325°F. Place turkey breast-side up on a wire rack in a shallow roasting pan. Check the internal temperature using a food thermometer – the center of the stuffing and meaty portion of the breast, thigh and wing joint must reach 165°F at a minimum. Cooking times will vary. Let the turkey stand 20 minutes. Then remove all stuffing from the cavity and carve the meat.

## **#5 Leftovers**

Perishable foods should not be left out of the refrigerator for more than 2 hours. Clostridium perfringens are bacteria that grow in cooked foods left at room temperature. It is the second most common bacteria to cause food poisoning. The major symptoms are vomiting and abdominal cramps within 6 to 24 hours after eating. Refrigerate leftovers at 40°F or colder as soon as possible and within two hours of preparation to prevent food poisoning and be sure to reheat all your leftovers to a minimum of 165°F.

### Leftover Storage Timeframes

#### Refrigerator (40°F or below)

- Cooked turkey: 3 to 4 days
- Cooked dishes and gravy: 3 to 4 days

#### Freezer (0 °F or below)

- Turkey, plain; slices or pieces: 4 mos.
- Turkey covered with broth or gravy: 6 mos.
- Cooked poultry dishes, stuffing and gravy: 4 to 6 mos.

With these tips, you will cook-up a feast to remember for the right reasons! If you need additional food safety information, [visit the EMD website](#) or call 916-875-8440.

Get full details of the [COVID-19 Holiday Events and Gatherings Guidance](#) and check out the [quick COVID-19 holiday tips flyer](#).

### **Summary of Revisions**

**11/22/21:** Initial version