**Safe Tips for Cooking a turkey**

So it's your turn to cook the turkey dinner and you're worried about that particular Aunt and Uncle or the rest of the family complaining that it is too dry, overcooked or undercooked? Unsure if you should buy a frozen turkey or a fresh one? If you’re afraid you’ll get it wrong, fear not, following these directions, anyone can cook a perfect turkey dinner for Christmas or any occasion.

Your choice of a frozen or fresh turkey could be based on personal preference as there is no significant difference in quality. When buying a fresh turkey, be sure you purchase it only 1-2 days before cooking. If you choose to buy a frozen turkey you may do so at any time, but you must allow time for it to thaw before cooking it.  The safest way to thaw a turkey is within its original plastic wrapper inside the fridge, since the bird will remain cool as it thaws thus reducing the growth of bacteria. You will need to allow approximately 24 hours per 2.5 kilograms of turkey for it to thaw completely, which will require up to 4 days for a 10 kg bird. If you don’t have enough time to thaw the turkey or don’t have room in the refrigerator, don’t panic. You can thaw it within a day by submerging the bird in cold water and change the water every 30 minutes or so. You’ll need to allow about 1 hour defrosting time per kilogram of turkey. You should avoid thawing your turkey on the kitchen counter at room temperature. A frozen turkey thaws from the outside in, allowing bacteria to multiply as its surface warms. In the time it takes for the entire turkey to thaw, the bacteria can multiply to dangerous levels.

An uncooked turkey will usually have bacteria like Salmonella and Campylobacter that can cause foodborne illness. These bacteria can spread throughout the kitchen and get on your hands, cutting boards, knives and counter tops while you handle and prepare the raw turkey. **Remember to always wash your hands, utensils, the sink, and anything else that comes in contact with raw turkey and its juices using soap and warm water.**

If you intend to serve stuffing with your turkey, the safest option is to prepare and cook the stuffing mixture outside the bird in a casserole dish with cooked juice from the turkey added to it. However, if you choose to stuff the turkey, stuff it loosely to help ensure the turkey is cooked completely. The stuffing should be moist, not dry, since heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment. Place the turkey in the oven immediately after it is stuffed. All stuffing, whether cooked separately or inside a bird, should be heated to a minimum internal temperature of 74°C (165°F).

Judging the cooking time for the turkey can be critical for food safety and in reducing some of the anxiety in juggling the preparation and cooking times of all the side dishes. A fully defrosted or fresh turkey will take roughly 30 to 40 minutes per kg to cook at a minimum oven temperature of 165°C (325°F). For example a 10 kg bird will take up to 5 hours to cook. If you cook a frozen turkey, it will take at least fifty percent longer to cook. Using a food thermometer is the safest way to determine when the turkey is cooked. A whole turkey is safely cooked when the internal temperature of the bird reaches 82°C (180°C) when placed in the innermost part of the thigh and wing.

 After dinner is finished, be sure to carve the meat off of the turkey and refrigerate the stuffing, turkey and left over side dishes separately in shallow containers within 2 hours of cooking. Use leftover turkey and stuffing within 3-4 days or freeze the leftovers. Leftovers can be safely enjoyed when reheated thoroughly to a temperature of 170 °F (71 °C) or until hot and steaming.

I wish you safe cooking, a merry Christmas, and a happy New Year.

Brian Moores

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