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Cooking a Turkey for Thanksgiving

There are literally hundreds of ways to cook a turkey, and each year new recipes and techniques are created based on trendy regional ingredients and creative cooking methods. Some are good, some are bad, and some are downright unsafe. All are designed to tantalize the senses and produce the perfect turkey - moist breast meat, tender legs and thighs, golden brown skin and memorable flavor.

The greatest challenge for new and experienced cooks alike is to avoid the dreaded "dry turkey," which is usually in reference to the white meat of the turkey breast. Because the flavor of turkey marries well with a host of ingredients, turkey can be successfully braised, roasted, grilled, fried, boiled, broiled, barbecued, and so on.

Believe it or not, cooking a turkey is not that difficult. Which turkey cooking method chosen is up to the cook – just make sure it is a safe method. Immediately before and following preparation, wash hands, utensils, the sink, and anything else in contact with raw turkey with hot, soapy water.

The Good

[Traditional Roast Turkey \(unstuffed\)](#)
[Traditional Roast Turkey \(stuffed\)](#)
[Oven Cooking Bag Method](#)
[Aluminum Foil Wrapped Method](#)
[Microwave Oven Method](#)
[Braised Method: Covered Roasting Pan](#)
[New Orleans Fried Turkey](#)

The Downright Unsafe Methods

[Brown Paper Bag Method](#)
[Trash Bag Method](#)
[Slow Cooking Overnight Method](#)
[Turducken](#)

Here are some instructions on preparing the holiday turkey:

Traditional Roast Turkey (unstuffed) [This method is preferred by USDA.]

1. Preheat oven to 325°F. Check the wrapper to see how much the turkey weighs, and determine approximate cooking time (see [chart below](#)). Remove the giblet bag and the neck from the turkey cavity. Wash the turkey inside and out, and pat skin dry with paper towels.
2. Place turkey breast side up on a rack in a shallow (about 2 inches deep) roasting pan. Insert meat thermometer into thigh. Add ½ cup water to the bottom of pan, if desired.
3. Cover turkey loosely with a tent of heavy-duty aluminum foil. Roast the turkey until temperature in the thickest part of the thigh reaches 180°F. Cooking time will vary — for example, a 20-pound turkey will take 4 ¼ to 5 hours to cook. Check the temperature on the thermometer after 4 ¼ hours.

4. Meanwhile, mix the stuffing or dressing. Place in a casserole and pop it into the oven during the last hour or so of roasting time.

5. Remove the foil tent after 1 to 1 ½ hours of cooking time to brown the skin. Brush with vegetable oil to enhance browning, if desired.

6. A whole turkey is done when the temperature reaches 180°F. The thigh juices should run clear (not pink) when pierced with a fork, and the leg joint should move freely.

7. Allow the turkey to set 20 to 30 minutes before carving to allow juices to saturate the meat evenly. Note: Cooking times do vary. Why? There are many reasons – oven temperature may not be completely accurate, the turkey may be very cold or partially frozen, and/or the roasting pan may be too small, which inhibits the flow of heat. The USDA highly recommends use of a meat thermometer to determine doneness of turkey.

Stuffed Roast Turkey

For uniform cooking results, the USDA recommends cooking the stuffing outside of the bird. If you insist on stuffing the turkey, stuff loosely. Allow ½ to ¾ cup stuffing per pound of turkey. It is safer to understuff than to overstuff the turkey. Stuffing expands during cooking. Check the internal temperature of the stuffing. Insert the thermometer through the cavity into the thickest part of the stuffing and leave it for 5 minutes, or use an instant read thermometer, which will register the temperature after 15 seconds. The stuffing temperature will rise a few degrees after the turkey is removed from the oven. If the center of the stuffing has not reached 165°F after stand time, return the turkey to the oven and continue cooking.

USDA Roasting Timetable for Fresh or Thawed Turkey at 325°F

These times are approximate, and should always be used in conjunction with a properly-placed thermometer:

Unstuffed

8 to 12 pounds	2 ¾ to 3 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 to 3 ¾ hours
14 to 18 pounds	3 ¾ to 4 ¼ hours
18 to 20 pounds	4 ¼ to 4 ½ hours
20 to 24 pounds	4 ½ to 5 hours

Stuffed

8 to 12 pounds	3 to 3 ½ hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 ½ to 4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	4 to 4 ¼ hours
18 to 20 pounds	4 ¼ to 4 ¾ hours
20 to 24 pounds	4 ¾ to 5 ¼ hours

The USDA does not recommend cooking turkey in an oven set lower than 325°F.

Oven Cooking Bag Method

Preparing a turkey in an oven cooking bag can be a safe and a delicious alternative to the traditional roasting method. In this technique, a large heat-tempered plastic cooking bag designed especially for oven temperatures is used. Bags can be purchased in the paper goods section of most grocery stores. Instructions for use are printed on the box.

When using an oven cooking bag, preheat the oven to 350°F. To prevent bursting, a tablespoon of dry flour is shaken around to coat the empty bag, and slits are cut in the bag to allow steam to escape. The pan holding the turkey in the bag must be large enough so the bag does not hang over the sides. Allow ample space for the bag to expand during cooking so that it does not touch the top or sides of the oven or it will melt.

This method produces a moist-heat cooking environment. A meat thermometer can be inserted right through the plastic into the thickest part of the thigh. The turkey is done when the temperature reaches 180°F.

If you are interested in brining a turkey, or another cooking method such as grilling or smoking, contact the Yell County Extension Office at 495-2216 for instructions.

Happy Thanksgiving!

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