

Turkey Basics



How to Safely Defrost a Turkey

Safely thawing a frozen turkey is one of the most important steps in preparing a meal. There are two recommended methods, depending on the amount of time available. Refrigerator thawing is preferred and the least labor intensive but requires more time. Cold water thawing takes less time but requires more attention. Regardless of which method you choose, you should never thaw a turkey at room temperature.

How to Defrost in Refrigerator

Thaw breast side up, in an unopened wrapper on a tray in the fridge. Allow 1 day of thawing for every 4 pounds.

Turkey Weight	Time to Defrost
8 - 12 pounds	1 - 2 days
13 - 15 pounds	2 - 3 days
16 - 19 pounds	3 - 4 days
20 - 24 pounds	4 - 5 days

How to Defrost in Cold Water

Thaw breast side down, in sealed package, with enough cold water to cover your turkey completely. Change water every 30 minutes to keep the turkey chilled. Allow 30 minutes of thawing per pound.

Turkey Weight	Time to Defrost
8 - 12 pounds	4 - 6 hours
13 - 15 pounds	6 - 8 hours
16 - 19 pounds	8 - 10 hours
20 - 24 pounds	10 - 12 hours

How to Roast a Turkey in the Oven

Set your oven to 325 °F and place unwrapped thawed turkey breast side up on a flat wire rack in a shallow roast pan. Add 1/2 cup of water to the bottom of the pan. Loosely cover the turkey with a tent of aluminum foil and place in oven. After 1 - 1 1/2 hours, remove the aluminum foil tent. Use the chart below to estimate cooking time:

Turkey Weight	Approximate Cooking Time
8 - 12 pounds	3 - 3 1/2 hours
13 - 15 pounds	3 1/2 - 4 hours
16 - 19 pounds	4 - 4 1/2 hours
20 - 24 pounds	4 1/2 - 5 hours

To ensure the turkey is thoroughly cooked, the internal temperature should be checked with a food thermometer. The temperature of the turkey must reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F before being served. Check the temperature in both the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. The thigh juices should run clear - not pink - when pierced with a fork and the leg joint should move freely. Once removed from the oven, allow the turkey to sit for 20 minutes before carving.

For more holiday food safety tips, visit holidayfoodsafety.org.