

Christmas food hygiene

Christmas food hygiene tips and how to cook your turkey safely.

There are an estimated 2.4 million cases of [food poisoning](#) in the UK each year. Whether cooking at home, or reusing leftovers, it's important to maintain good food hygiene at Christmas by following the '4Cs' of [cleaning](#), [chilling](#), [cooking](#) and avoiding [cross-contamination](#).

Christmas is a significant period of food waste. [Love Food Hate Waste](#) estimate over 100,000 tonnes of edible poultry, 96,000 tonnes of carrots and 710,000 tonnes of potatoes are thrown away each year in the UK.

Thinking hygienically when storing, cooking, reusing and freezing food will help keep your Christmas safe and minimise food waste over the festive period.

Christmas food shopping

Important

If you are buying turkey, duck or goose products from 28th November – 31st December to freeze at home you may notice that some are labelled as 'defrosted'.

The reason for this is that [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs \(Defra\)](#) and the [Welsh Government](#) announced a temporary change in marketing rules as part of a range of measures to help support the poultry industry with the current challenges presented by bird flu.

There will be clear labelling on the front of the pack, as well as information in-store, to show if a product has been defrosted, and whether it is suitable for home freezing.

This temporary change for England and Wales will only apply to some turkey, duck and goose products and does not apply to chicken.

Take enough bags for your Christmas food shop so that you can keep raw and ready-to-eat food apart. To prevent cross-contamination, store raw meat, fish and shellfish separately from ready-to-eat food and vegetables. Keep raw foods covered on the bottom shelf of your fridge.

When food shopping over the Christmas period, it is important to understand the difference between best before and use-by dates to effectively plan your meals, get food to last longer, and make sure you're not throwing away food unnecessarily.

Check your fridge is set at 5°C or below. Test this with a fridge thermometer. If your food is stored at the correct temperature, it should last right up to the use-by date. For the use-by date to be a valid guide, you must carefully follow storage instructions.

How to defrost your turkey

If your turkey is frozen, check the guidance on the packaging in advance. Some turkeys can be cooked from frozen if the manufacturer's instructions say so. However, most frozen turkeys will need to be defrosted. Plan this in advance, as a whole turkey can take between 3 to 5 days to properly defrost.

Do not defrost your turkey at room temperature, instead, you should defrost your turkey in the fridge. Always defrost your turkey in a container large enough to catch the liquid that comes out during thawing. This is to avoid cross-contamination. Use a covered dish at the bottom of the fridge so that it cannot drip onto other foods. Always wash your hands thoroughly after handling any part of the raw turkey.

A typical large turkey weighing 6-7kg could take as much as 4 days to fully defrost in the fridge. If there are no instructions for defrosting your turkey, you can work out yourself how long it will take to thaw completely. In a fridge, allow around 10-12 hours per kg.

If your turkey is not fully defrosted before cooking, it may cook unevenly. This means harmful bacteria can survive the cooking process and you will be at risk of food poisoning.

How to cook your turkey

Do not wash raw turkey before cooking. Washing raw meat spreads germs onto your hands, clothes, utensils and worktops. Thorough cooking will kill any bacteria present.

When cooking your turkey, always check the advice on the packaging and follow the instructions provided. The cooking guidelines will be based on a bird that is not stuffed.

After touching raw poultry it is important to wash your hands thoroughly. Also, clean any work surfaces, chopping board or utensils raw poultry has been in contact with.

Cook your stuffing in a separate roasting tin, not inside the turkey. A stuffed turkey will take longer to cook and may not cook thoroughly if it has not reached the correct temperature throughout.

To work out the cooking time for your turkey, check the retailer's instructions on the packaging. If there are no cooking instructions, in an oven preheated to 180°C (350°F or Gas Mark 4):

- allow 45 minutes per kg plus 20 minutes for a turkey that weighs under 4.5kg
- allow 40 minutes per kg for a turkey that weighs between 4.5kg and 6.5kg
- allow 35 minutes per kg for a turkey that weighs over 6.5kg

Other birds need different cooking times and temperatures:

- goose should be cooked in a preheated oven at 200°C (400°F or Gas Mark 6) for 35 minutes per kg
- duck should be cooked in a preheated oven at 200°C (400°F or Gas Mark 6) for 45 minutes per kg
- chicken should be cooked in a preheated oven at 180°C (350°F or Gas Mark 4) for 45 minutes per kg plus 20 minutes

Make sure your turkey is steaming hot and cooked all the way through.

If you do not have a meat thermometer or temperature probe, cut into the thickest part of the meat, check that none of the meat is pink and that any juices run clear. In a whole bird, the thickest part of the meat is the area between the leg and the breast.

If you do have a temperature probe, check the thickest part of the meat; it needs to reach one of the following combinations to make sure it has been cooked properly:

- 60°C for 45 minutes
- 65°C for 10 minutes
- 70°C for 2 minutes

- 75°C for 30 seconds
- 80°C for 6 seconds

Remember to fully clean the temperature probe or cooking thermometer after each use to avoid cross-contamination.

Reusing your leftovers

Reuse and reinvent your leftovers in different ways. Cool and cover your leftovers, and put them in a fridge or freezer within one to two hours. Splitting leftovers into smaller portions will cool food quicker, it may be more convenient to defrost portioned meals later.

You can freeze cooked turkey, other cooked meat and meals made from cooked and frozen meat. It will be safe to eat for a long time, but you may see a deterioration in quality after 3-6 months.

Once defrosted, you should eat the food within 24 hours. You can also use previously cooked frozen turkey to make a new meal, such as a turkey curry.

[Love Food Hate Waste](#) have various creative recipes and ideas for how to make your Christmas leftovers go further.

Freezing your leftovers

Freeze and defrost any leftovers for future dishes. Freezing acts as a pause button. It is safe to freeze food right up until the use-by date.

You can freeze most food. This includes raw and cooked meats, fruit, potatoes (after boiling for five minutes), grated cheese, and eggs. Love Food Hate Waste have an [A-Z on food storage](#) including how to freeze many different types of food.

When food defrosts, its core temperature rises. This provides the ideal conditions for bacteria to grow if left at room temperature. It is best to defrost food slowly and safely in the fridge.

You can also defrost your leftovers thoroughly in a microwave. Make sure you reheat until steaming hot. Once the food is defrosted eat within 24 hours.

FSA Explains

This year, some turkey, duck or goose products may have been previously frozen and defrosted before being placed on sale as chilled. This does not apply to chicken.

This is because this year [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs \(Defra\)](#) and the [Welsh Government](#) announced a temporary change in marketing rules as part of a range of measures to help support the poultry industry with the current challenges presented by bird flu.

If you are planning to refreeze your product it's important that you check the label. This is because different products may or may not be suitable for domestic refreezing depending on how they have been processed by the manufacturer. Products will be clearly labelled with appropriate instructions.

Like other poultry, these defrosted products will be perfectly safe for you and your family to eat as long as you follow the instructions on the label and practice good food hygiene.?

This is different to our usual advice of not refreezing raw meat thawed at home as the food industry has specialist equipment to very quickly freeze, then defrost these products in controlled

conditions. Home freezers are less efficient?so defrosting and refreezing raw meat at home could allow the growth of harmful germs. ?

This temporary change doesn't alter our standard advice of not refreezing raw meat at home.