

Christmas food hygiene

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

Avoid the unwanted gift of food poisoning this Christmas.

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:

- [cleaning](#)
- [chilling](#)
- [cooking](#)
- and avoiding [cross-contamination](#).

Christmas is a significant period of food waste. [Love Food Hate Waste](#) estimates 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. 18 million tonnes of CO2 are generated by UK homes from wasted consumable food and drink.

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

Christmas food shopping

From shopping bags to fridge space, there are many ways to prepare for Christmas with food safety in mind.

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 will be safe to eat right up to and including the use-by date. For the use-by date to be a valid guide, you must carefully follow storage instructions.

Plan fridge and freezer space to allow for extra room if you need it. Check if items need to be refrigerated.

Take enough bags for your Christmas food shop. This means that you can keep raw and ready-to-eat food apart.

When shopping, consider using cool bags to keep chilled food at the right temperature.

Store raw meat, fish, and shellfish separately from ready-to-eat food and vegetables.

Ideally, **keep raw meat and fish covered on the bottom shelf** of your fridge to avoid cross-contamination or spillages.

Check for [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.

If your fridge is looking full, **take out items that don't need to be chilled**, such as unopened soft drinks or bread. This will make room for items that do need to be chilled for safety reasons, such as raw, ready-to-eat and cooked food.

How to defrost your turkey

If your turkey is frozen, check the guidance on the packaging in advance for how long it will take to defrost. 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 (thawed all the way to the middle). **If you are cooking a turkey crown, follow the defrosting instructions on the packaging.** If there are no instructions, you can follow the guidance below.

Do not defrost your turkey at room temperature, instead, you should defrost your turkey in the fridge (on the bottom shelf). Ideally, defrost your turkey in a container big enough to catch any drips to avoid cross-contamination. Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water 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 and your guests 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.

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 meat, it is important to wash your hands thoroughly with warm water and soap.

Cook the 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.

Clean all work surfaces, chopping board or utensils any raw poultry has been in contact with.

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 (160°C fan, 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 (180 °C fan, 400°F or Gas Mark 6) for 35 minutes per kg
- duck should be cooked in a preheated oven at 200°C (180 °C fan, 400°F or Gas Mark 6) for 45 minutes per kg
- chicken should be cooked in a preheated oven at 180°C (160°C fan, 350°F or Gas Mark 4) for 45 minutes per kg plus 20 minutes

Please see [our 'Cooking your food' page](#) for further information on cooking meats and other food safely.

Check your turkey is fully cooked

Make sure your turkey, or any other bird you're preparing for Christmas, 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.

Freezing and reusing your leftovers

There are many different ways you can reuse and reinvent your Christmas leftovers and make your food go further.

Freeze any leftovers for future dishes. Freezing acts as a pause button. It is safe to freeze food right up to and including 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 has an? A-Z on food storage?](#) including how to freeze many different types of food, as well as recipes.

You can freeze cooked turkey, other cooked meat and meals made from previously 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. This is called freezer burn.

FSA Explains

Freezer burn is when foods in the freezer are exposed to cold, dry air, which causes them to dehydrate and form ice crystals over time. This process affects the quality of the foods, rather than the safety.

Freezer burn can be avoided by carefully packaging foods in the freezer and checking foods aren't kept for too long.

Meats are usually best eaten within 2-3 months. Baked goods, fruit and veg are best between 3-4 months.

Cool cooked food quickly at room temperature and refrigerate or freeze within one to two hours.

Splitting leftovers into smaller portions will help cool food quicker. It may also be more convenient to freeze and defrost portioned meals later.

Label and date anything you are freezing so you can easily see what it is; you don't want a UFO (Unidentified Frozen Object)!

Defrost food slowly and safely in the fridge or thoroughly in a microwave on the defrost setting. Don't defrost at room temperature.

Make sure food has been fully defrosted, as partially defrosted food may not cook evenly. This means that harmful bacteria could survive the cooking process.

Once the food is defrosted **eat within 24 hours and do not refreeze.**

Make sure you reheat any defrosted food until steaming hot.