

Christmas

There are an estimated one million cases of [food poisoning](#) in the UK every year, and without attention to food hygiene, this doesn't stop during the festive season.

Food poisoning can have serious consequences, especially for children, people already in ill-health and older people. It's important to keep up your standards of food hygiene at Christmas by following the '4Cs'.

The '4Cs' are:

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

Buying and storing your turkey and festive feast

When doing your Christmas food shopping, take enough bags so that you can pack raw and ready-to-eat food separately. This will help you to avoid [cross-contamination](#).

Once you get your shopping home, plan your fridge and freezer space effectively. Some foods need to be kept in the fridge to help slow down the growth of bacteria and keep food fresh and safe for longer.

Tip

If your fridge is looking full, take out items that don't need to be chilled, such as beer. This will make room for the items that do need to be chilled for safety reasons, such as your turkey and trifle.

To prevent cross-contamination, store raw foods separately from cooked and ready-to-eat food. This includes:

- raw meat including chicken and turkey
- fish and shellfish
- vegetables

Keep these foods covered and chilled on the bottom shelf of your fridge. Check regularly that your fridge is cold enough – it should be below 5°C. Use a fridge thermometer to check because the dials on fridges are not always a good indicator of how cold the fridge is.

Defrosting your turkey

If your turkey is frozen, check the guidance on the packaging well in advance. This will ensure you allow enough time to fully defrost it in the fridge before cooking it. A typical large turkey weighing 6-7kg could take as much as 4 days to fully defrost in the fridge.

If there aren't any instructions for defrosting on the packaging of your turkey, you can work out how long it will take to thaw completely. In a fridge allow around 10-12 hours per kg.

Do not defrost your turkey at room temperature.

To avoid cross-contamination always defrost your turkey into a container large enough to catch any juices.

Make sure your turkey is fully defrosted before cooking. If it's not, it may not cook evenly. This means harmful bacteria could survive the cooking process. Some turkeys can be cooked from frozen if the manufacturer's instructions say so. Always read and follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Bacteria will grow faster at temperatures above 8°C and below 63°C. This is known as the 'Danger Zone' for microbial growth. That's why we advise that the safest way to defrost food is in the fridge. Your food should never enter the 'Danger Zone' if it is defrosted in the fridge. Your fridge should be at 5°C or below as some bacteria can grow at lower temperatures than 8°C.

Preparing your turkey

Effective cleaning removes bacteria on hands, equipment and surfaces. This helps to stop harmful bacteria from spreading onto food through cross-contamination. To minimise the chances of bacteria spreading:

- use different utensils, plates and chopping boards for ready-to-eat food and raw food that requires cooking
- wash your hands after touching raw meat and before you handle ready-to-eat food
- don't wash raw turkey or any other meat – it just splashes germs onto your hands, clothes, utensils and worktops. Thorough cooking will kill any bacteria present
- don't prepare food for others if you have suffered from food poisoning or have an infectious illness

Cooking your turkey

Cooking your turkey at the right temperature and for the correct length of time will ensure that any harmful bacteria are killed. Always check the advice on the packaging and follow the cooking instructions provided.

Cook your stuffing in a separate roasting tin, not inside the turkey. The turkey will cook more easily and the cooking guidelines will be based on a bird that is not stuffed. A stuffed turkey will take longer to cook and may not cook thoroughly if it has not reached the correct temperature all the way through.

Before serving your turkey, always check that:

- the meat is steaming hot throughout
- there is no pink meat visible
- the juices run clear when you cut into the thickest part of the meat

How long to cook your turkey for

To work out the cooking time for your bird, check the retailer's instructions on the packaging. If there aren't any cooking instructions, here's a cooking guide you can use. As a general guide, in an oven preheated to 180°C, 350°F or Gas Mark 4, you should:

- 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's between 4.5kg and 6.5kg
- allow 35 minutes per kg for a turkey weighing more than 6.5kg

The cooking times above are based on an unstuffed bird. Some ovens, such as fan-assisted ovens, might cook the bird more quickly. Check the guidance on the packaging and the manufacturer's handbook for your oven.

Cover your turkey with foil during cooking and uncover for the last 30 minutes to brown the skin. To stop the meat drying out, baste it every hour during cooking.

How long to cook your duck for

Other birds, such as a goose or a duck, need different cooking times and temperatures.

The different heat and time for each bird is:

- geese should be cooked in a preheated oven at 220°C/425°F/Gas Mark 7 for 35 minutes per kg
- ducks should be cooked in a preheated oven at 200°C/400°F/Gas Mark 6 for 45 minutes per kg
- chickens should be cooked in a preheated oven at 180°C/350°F/Gas Mark 4 for 45 minutes per kg plus 20 minutes extra

We advise that you cook geese and ducks at higher temperatures than chicken. This is to help render the fat. Unlike chickens, ducks and geese are waterfowl and have a thick layer of fat under the skin to keep them warm and aid their buoyancy. To remove this, the birds must be cooked at higher temperatures.

Using a temperature probe or a cooking thermometer

Temperature probes are used to check the internal temperature of meat occasionally. Cooking thermometers are left in the bird while it cooks.

If you're using either, you should check the temperature of the thickest part of the bird, between the breast and the thigh. This needs to reach a temperature of 70°C for 2 minutes or an equivalent time and temperature combination:

- 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 thermometer after each use to avoid cross-contamination.

Some retailers include pop-up timers with their poultry products, which can also be used as an indicator of when the bird is thoroughly cooked. Once the indicator stick (typically red) pops up, this indicates that the bird is thoroughly cooked. You might also want to double-check this visually. Pop-up timers are easy to read because it's as simple as 'Cooked' or 'Not cooked yet'.

Tip

Cooking your turkey in advance could save you stress on Christmas Day and give you more time with your family and friends.

Once your turkey is cooked and cooled, slice and then batch it into portions to store in the freezer. You can then take out and defrost the amount you need when you want to reheat it. This is safer and will help to avoid food waste.

Remember that meat previously cooked and frozen should only be reheated once.

Love your leftovers

Here are our top tips to avoid being wasteful and make your food go further this festive season.

Cool any leftovers at room temperature, then cover them and ensure that they go in the fridge or freezer within one-two hours.

If you have a lot of one type of food, splitting it into smaller portions will help it to cool quickly. It also means you can freeze and defrost only what you need for future dishes.

Don't forget, leftovers should be eaten or frozen within two days or within one day for rice dishes.

You can freeze cooked turkey, other cooked meat and meals made from cooked and frozen meat. But once defrosted, you should eat the food within 24 hours.

You can also use previously cooked and frozen turkey to make a new meal, such as a turkey curry. This new meal can be frozen too, but make sure you only reheat it once. When you come to use frozen leftovers, make sure you defrost them thoroughly, ideally in the fridge overnight. If this isn't possible, use a microwave on the defrost setting. Always reheat leftovers until steaming hot.

Take a look at [Love Food Hate Waste](#) for more information on freezing leftovers, including recipe ideas.

Understanding food poisoning

Many people mistakenly think that food poisoning is just a passing 'tummy bug' but it can be really serious.

Most people with food poisoning recover at home and don't need any specific treatment. Find out more about the symptoms of [food poisoning](#) and what to do if someone has severe symptoms.

Food poisoning can be caused by various bacteria including:

- [campylobacter](#)
- [salmonella](#)

- [listeria](#)
- [some types of E. Coli](#)