

How to Safely Thaw Your Thanksgiving Turkey

Following the FDA Model Food Code 2022

Safe. Simple. Approved by the FDA Model Food Code.



Why Safe Thawing Matters

The Danger Zone

Unsafe thawing allows harmful bacteria to multiply rapidly when turkey remains between **41°F and 135°F** (5°C–57°C). At these temperatures, bacteria can double every 20 minutes.

"The only thing you want to share at Thanksgiving is good food — not foodborne illness."



Before You Start: Essential Prep

1

Choose Your Method

Select one of four FDA-approved thawing methods based on your timeline and equipment available.

2

Plan Your Time

Calculate thawing time based on turkey weight. A 20-pound turkey needs 4-5 days in the refrigerator.

3

Prevent Cross-Contamination

Keep raw turkey separate from ready-to-eat foods. Always sanitize surfaces and utensils after contact.

Four FDA-Approved Thawing Methods

According to the FDA Model Food Code 2022, you may thaw food safely using one of these approved methods:



Refrigerator

≤41°F (5°C)



Running Water

≤70°F (21°C)



Microwave

Immediate cooking required



Cook from Frozen

Direct to oven

Method 1: Refrigerator Thawing

The Preferred Method

Temperature: Keep at $\leq 41^{\circ}\text{F}$ (5°C) throughout the entire thawing process.

Placement: Place turkey breast-side up on a rimmed tray on the lowest refrigerator shelf to catch any drips.

Time Required: Allow approximately 24 hours per 4–5 pounds of turkey.

Bonus: Once fully thawed, you may safely hold the turkey in the refrigerator for 1–2 days before cooking.



Refrigerator Thawing Timeline

1 10-Pound Turkey

2 days in refrigerator

2 15-Pound Turkey

3-4 days in refrigerator

3 20-Pound Turkey

4-5 days in refrigerator

4 24-Pound Turkey

5-6 days in refrigerator



Method 2: Cold Running Water Thawing



Fast & Safe

- Submerge turkey completely in cold running water at $\leq 70^{\circ}\text{F}$ (21°C)
- Maintain continuous overflow to keep water moving around the turkey
- Allow approximately 30 minutes per pound
- **Cook immediately after thawing**

❏ Critical: Total time above 41°F must never exceed 4 hours to prevent bacterial growth.

Cold Water Thawing Timeline

5hrs

10-Pound Turkey

Cold running water method

7.5hrs

15-Pound Turkey

Cold running water method

10hrs

20-Pound Turkey

Cold running water method

Remember: This method requires your attention throughout the process. The water must run continuously, and you must cook the turkey immediately upon completion.

Method 3: Microwave Thawing



Remove Packaging

Take turkey out of all wrapping materials before placing in microwave




Use Defrost Setting

Follow your microwave's specific defrost instructions and rotate frequently



Cook Immediately

Transfer to oven right away — do not hold or refrigerate

 **Warning:** Microwave thawing creates warm spots where bacteria can grow. Immediate cooking is essential.

Method 4: Cook Directly from Frozen

No Thawing Required

This method works when you're short on time or forgot to plan ahead. The turkey cooks safely from its frozen state.

1. Preheat oven to recommended temperature
2. Remove packaging and place turkey on rack in shallow roasting pan
3. Add approximately 50% extra cooking time
4. Use meat thermometer to ensure 165°F (74°C) internal temperature in thickest part

Pro Tip: Tent with foil if browning too quickly on the outside.



What NOT To Do

Unsafe Thawing Practices to Avoid

✗ Never Thaw on the Countertop

Room temperature allows the outer portions to enter the danger zone while the inside remains frozen, creating perfect conditions for rapid bacteria growth.

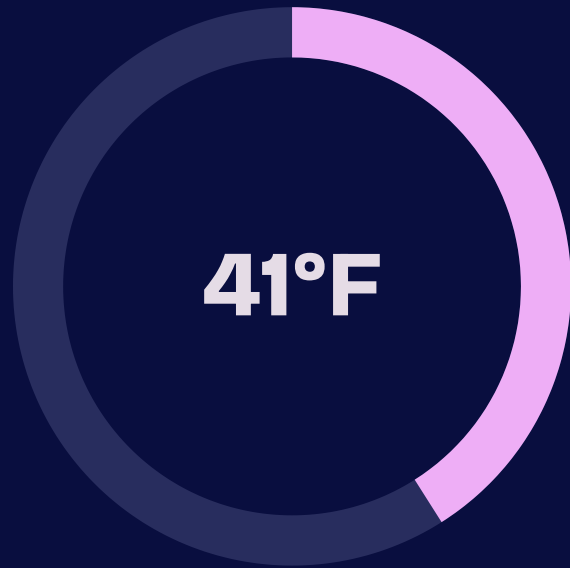
✗ Never Soak in Standing Warm Water

Warm water accelerates bacterial multiplication. Water must be cold ($\leq 70^{\circ}\text{F}$) and continuously running to be safe.

✗ Never Microwave-Thaw and Hold

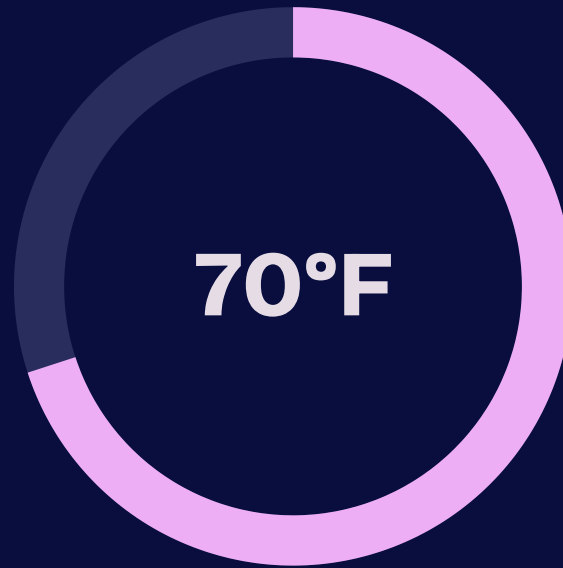
Microwave thawing must be followed by immediate cooking. Holding creates dangerous bacterial growth in warm spots.

Understanding Temperature Safety



Refrigerator Maximum

Keep at or below for safe thawing



Cold Water Maximum

Never exceed this temperature



Safe Cooking Temperature

Internal temperature for fully
cooked poultry

After Thawing: Critical Next Steps

01

Refrigerator-Thawed Turkey

May be held safely in the refrigerator for 1-2 days before cooking. Keep at $\leq 41^{\circ}\text{F}$ (5°C).

03

Cook Stuffing Separately

For maximum safety, prepare stuffing outside the turkey cavity in a separate dish.

02

Cold-Water or Microwave-Thawed

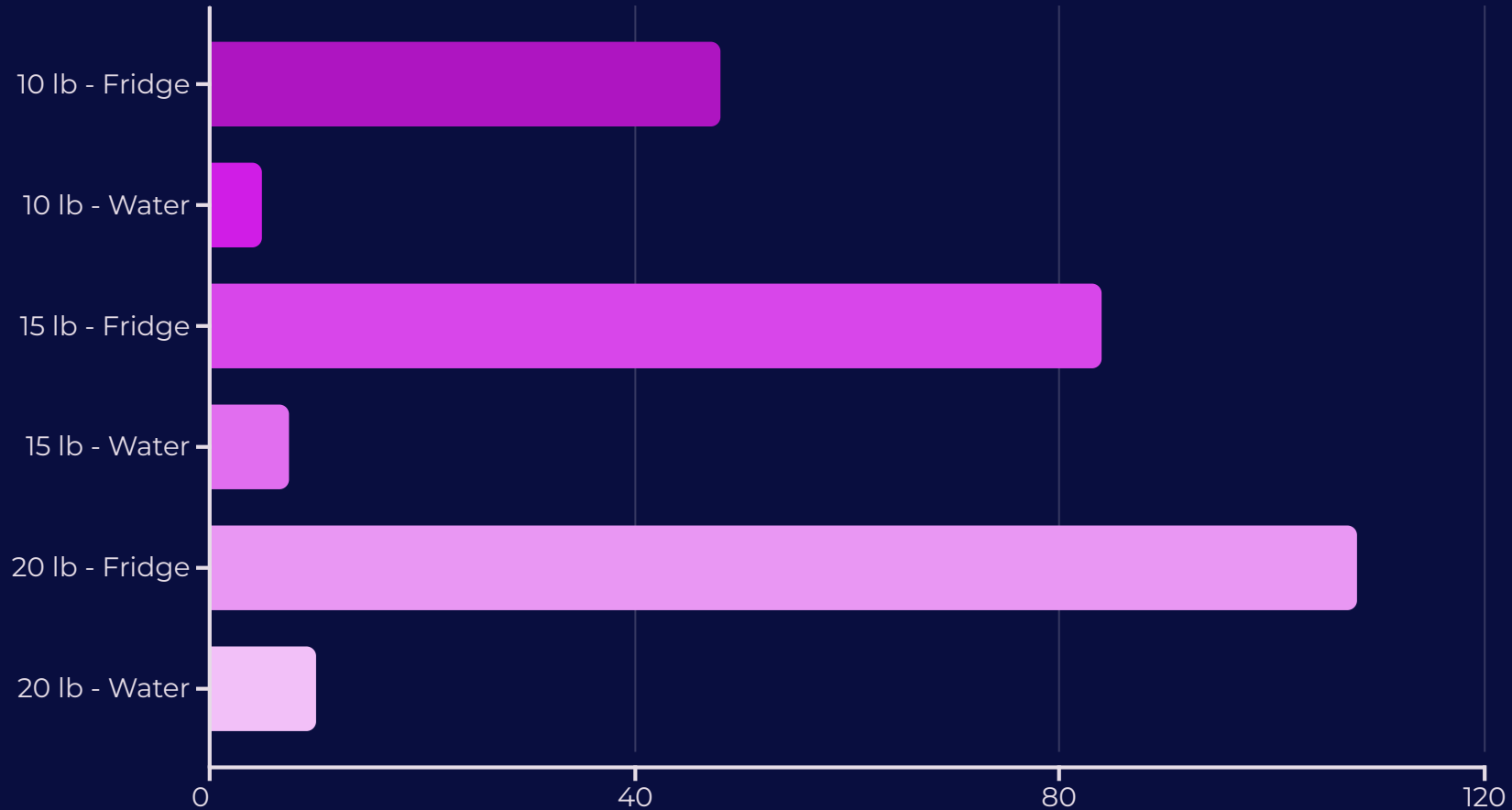
Must be cooked immediately. Do not hold or refrigerate after thawing by these methods.

04

Verify Internal Temperature

Use a food thermometer to confirm 165°F (74°C) in the innermost part of the thigh and wing, and the thickest part of the breast.

Complete Timing Reference Guide



Planning Tip: Don't rush the process. Starting early with refrigerator thawing is always the safest choice.

Cross-Contamination Prevention



Essential Safety Practices

- **Dedicated Space:** Use the lowest refrigerator shelf for thawing to prevent drips onto other foods
- **Proper Containers:** Always place turkey on a rimmed tray or in a leak-proof pan
- **Sanitize Thoroughly:** Clean and sanitize all surfaces, cutting boards, and utensils that contact raw turkey
- **Hand Hygiene:** Wash hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds after handling raw poultry
- **Separate Equipment:** Use different utensils and cutting boards for raw turkey and ready-to-eat foods

Quick Decision Guide

Have 4-5 Days?

Choose refrigerator thawing for the safest, most hands-off method with flexibility for cooking time.

Have 6-10 Hours?

Use cold running water thawing, but remember you must cook immediately afterward.

Need It Fast?

Microwave thawing works for smaller turkeys (under 12 lbs), with immediate cooking required.

Forgot to Thaw?

Cook from frozen — just add 50% more cooking time and monitor internal temperature carefully.

Safety Checklist: Final Recap

Temperature Control

Refrigerator thawing at $\leq 41^{\circ}\text{F}$ (5°C) or cold running water at $\leq 70^{\circ}\text{F}$ (21°C)

Immediate Cooking Rule

Cook immediately after cold-water or microwave thawing — no exceptions

Internal Temperature Verification

Always verify 165°F (74°C) internal temperature with a food thermometer

Cross-Contamination Prevention

Sanitize all surfaces and wash hands thoroughly after handling raw turkey



Safe. Simple. Certified.

Following FDA Model Food Code 2022 guidelines ensures your Thanksgiving turkey is both delicious and safe for your loved ones. Proper thawing is the foundation of food safety during holiday meal preparation.



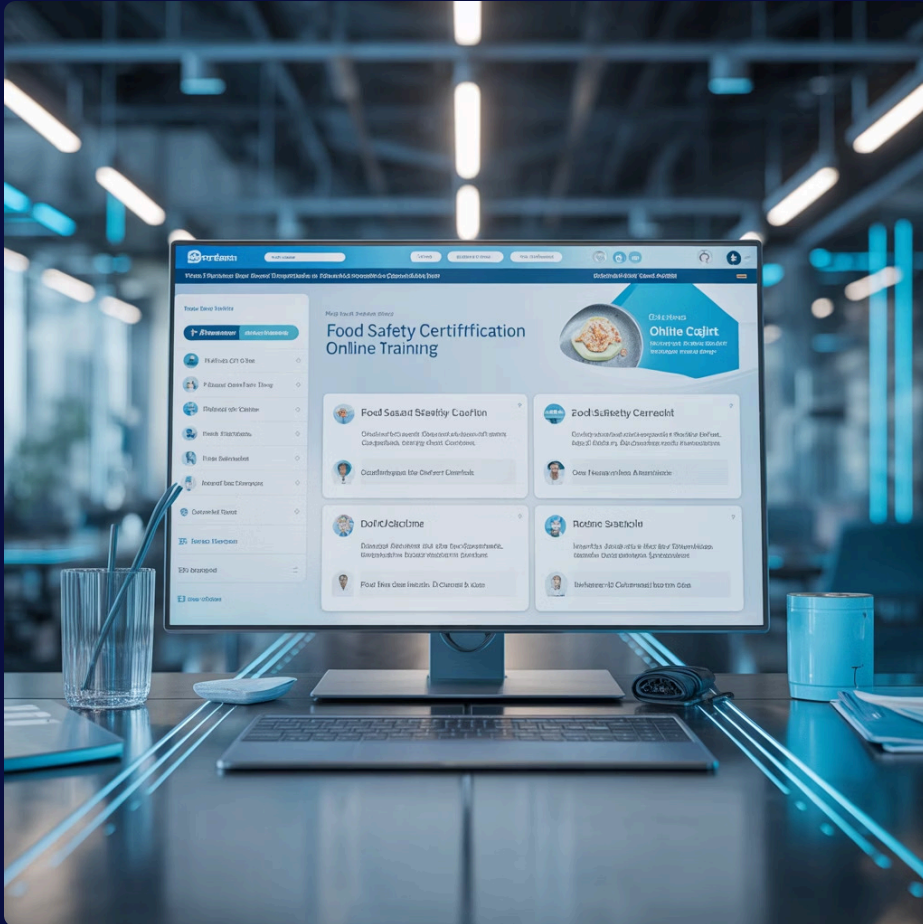
Want More Food Safety Expertise?

Learn from the Experts

Get comprehensive food safety tips, holiday cooking guidance, and ServSafe-style certification training from certified instructors.

Visit [OnFocusSolutions.com](https://www.onfocusolutions.com) for expert-led online courses that cover everything from basic food handling to advanced food safety management.

Perfect for home cooks, culinary students, and foodservice professionals.





Thank You for Prioritizing Food Safety!

Have a safe and delicious Thanksgiving!

For more food safety resources and training:

 [FoodManagerUSA.com](https://www.FoodManagerUSA.com)

Subscribe for ongoing food safety tips, seasonal guides, and professional certification opportunities.