



Vilas County Public Health Department

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Thanksgiving Tips to Keep your Family Safe and Healthy

More than 46 million turkeys are eaten on Thanksgiving Day. Combine the turkey with a number of side dishes and desserts, and it is by far the largest and most stressful meal many people make all year. This can leave room for mistakes that can make family and guests sick.

“Turkey, other meat and poultry may contain bacteria, such as Salmonella and Campylobacter, which can lead to serious foodborne illness,” said Amy Springer, RS, Environmental Health Specialist, Vilas County Public Health Department. “By properly handling and cooking the turkey and other dishes, you can make sure your family has a safe and healthy Thanksgiving meal.”

Follow these five steps:

Wash your hands, but not your turkey. The simplest way to stop the spread of bacteria is to wash your hands before cooking. The simplest way to spread bacteria all over the kitchen is to wash the turkey. Studies show that washing meat or poultry can splash bacteria around your kitchen by up to 3 feet, contaminating countertops, towels and other food. Washing doesn't get rid of bacteria from the bird. Only cooking the turkey to the correct inner temperature will kill bacteria. The exception to this rule is brining. When rinsing brine off of a turkey, be sure to remove all other food or objects from the sink. Layer the area with paper towels and allow a slow stream of water to avoid splashing.

To stuff or not to stuff. For ideal safety, do not stuff the turkey. Even if the turkey is cooked to the correct inner temperature, the stuffing inside may not have reached a temperature high enough to kill the bacteria. It is best to cook the stuffing in a separate dish.

Take the temperature of the bird. The only way to make sure your turkey is cooked to the correct inner temperature is to use a food thermometer. Take the bird's temperature in three areas: the thickest part of the breast, the innermost part of the wing and the innermost part of the thigh, to make sure all three areas are at 165°F. Cook the turkey as long as needed until **ALL** three areas reach 165°F.

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Follow the two-hour rule. Do not leave foods that spoil easily on the table or countertops for more than two hours. After two hours, food falls into temperatures between 40-140°F. This is called the Danger Zone. This is where bacteria can quickly grow. If that food is then eaten, people could get sick. Cut turkey into smaller slices and refrigerate along with other foods, such as potatoes, gravy and vegetables. Leftovers should stay safe in the refrigerator for four days.

If you have questions about your Thanksgiving dinner, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) to talk to a food safety expert. You can also visit [FoodSafety.gov](https://www.foodsafety.gov) to learn more about how to safely pick, thaw and prepare a turkey.

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