

ORGANIZING AND CLEANING YOUR HOME

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When cleaning, focus your attention on the parts of the house that will actually be used. While it may be great to have all of the kids' rooms sparkling, the kitchen and the dining rooms should have the lion's share of the cleaning. Keep one bathroom "off limits" so you can get it done ahead of time.

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Refrigerator space is at a premium during the holidays. So a week prior to the big day start using as much of the food you already have as possible.

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If you are expecting house guests have them pitch in. Everyone wants to feel useful and if you allow yourself to give up some control, there are simple yet time-consuming tasks that can be accomplished by anyone (opening the wine, filling glasses with ice).

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If you are traveling, keep in mind that Thanksgiving is the busiest travel day of the year. Allow plenty of time for the airport. An extra hour "flexible" time can add years to your already stressed nervous system.

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When creating your grocery list, organize it according to your store. Put all of the dairy items together, produce, baking needs etc. This will keep you from backtracking in the store.

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Let others bring their specialties to the table. There is nothing that cements good feelings like complementing someone's cooking.

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Be prepared for leftovers by having plenty of airtight containers on hand.

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Don't forget to allow plenty of time to thaw your turkey, often 3 to 4 days! Or get a fresh turkey as an option.

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If you are using good china and silver, make a count of your pieces before any garbage leaves the house!

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After stuffing yourself at the table, get outside and take a walk. Play bocce. Get moving and work off some of the calories. Board games are always a part of our Thanksgiving tradition. And... turn off the TV! It's only one day; give your guests your full attention.

THANKSGIVING TURKEY TIPS

Estimate one pound of uncooked turkey per person—enough meat for dinner and leftovers the next day.

What if most of my family wants white meat?

Cook an additional turkey breast. On the other hand, if your family prefers dark meat, cook two small turkeys instead of one large one.

I bought two turkeys last year but used only one—the other is still in my freezer. Can I cook it this year?

Properly wrapped poultry can be kept for up to one year if it is frozen below 0°F. Keep whole uncooked turkeys in their original packaging when you freeze them.

What's the best way to thaw my turkey?

There are two tried-and-true ways to defrost a turkey.

The first option is to place it into your refrigerator: Leave the turkey sealed in its packaging and set it in a shallow pan on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator (typically the coldest part). It should take about 24 hours of thawing for every four to five pounds.

The second option is to let it thaw in cold water: Submerge the wrapped turkey in cold water in a large container. Allow at least 30 minutes of thawing per pound (and change the water every 30 minutes). You can keep a thawed turkey in the refrigerator up to four days before cooking. If Thanksgiving Day sneaks up on you and you forgot to defrost your turkey, be sure to allow 50 percent more cooking time.

I'm never sure if my turkey is done; I always end up overcooking it. How can I tell when it's ready?

If you don't already have an oven thermometer, get one! You definitely need to make sure your oven is maintaining the right temperature. A meat thermometer is crucial too—an instant-read one is convenient. To test for accuracy, hold it in boiling water to make sure it reads 212°F. For cooking times, estimate about 3 to 3 ¾ hours for roasting a 12- to 14-pound turkey in a 325°F oven. To find out whether or not the turkey is done, insert the meat thermometer into the thickest part of the muscle and be careful not to touch the bone. Remove the bird from the oven when the thigh meat reaches an internal temperature of 175°F and the breast meat reaches an internal temperature of 165°F.

How can I stuff the turkey safely?

Prepare the stuffing just prior to filling the turkey; if you're prepping ahead of time, keep the wet and dry ingredients separate. Only stuff the turkey if it is completely thawed, and don't stuff the cavity too tightly. You'll need to cook a stuffed bird about 30 minutes longer than an unstuffed one—or until the internal temperature of the stuffing reaches 165°F.

We have a lot of leftovers this year. How long will they stay fresh?

Cooked poultry should be kept refrigerated for a maximum of three to four days; stuffing and gravy are good for one to two days. Reheat leftovers to an internal temperature of 165°F.