

Cooking Do's and Don'ts For Your Holiday Feast

1 in 6 of us gets food poisoning each year. How to keep everyone at your table healthy

Ham, turkey, duck, beef, and pork roasts are all a beloved part of many holiday meals. But because a lot of us only cook these once or twice a year, we run a higher risk of preparation and cooking goof-ups that can compromise taste at best—and at worst make people sick. Don't want your guests to join the one in six people who get food poisoning each year in the U.S.? Use this guide to selecting, storing, cooking, and serving those holiday staples.

- **Choose the right meat.** If you're picking up a roast from a stand-alone refrigerator case at the supermarket, don't take the package on top, especially if it's above the edges of the case, suggests Francis Largeman-Roth, R.D., a dietitian in New York City. "Those cases only keep things truly cold as far as the walls of the case go up," she says.

Look for cuts of meat that are lean, defined as less than 10 grams of total fat, no more than 4.5 grams of saturated fat, and fewer than 95 milligrams of cholesterol per serving. The label can provide clues. For example, cuts that include the word "round" are the lowest in fat, with "loin" a close second, says Heather Mangieri, R.D., a dietitian in Pittsburgh and a spokeswoman for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Turkey or duck breasts are leaner than a whole bird.

And read the ingredients list on poultry items. Turkeys are sometimes injected with a solution of saltwater and other additives to enhance juiciness. That can add a lot of sodium, so it's better to look for a turkey that contains nothing but, well, turkey.

- **Store and prep properly.** How long one can keep a turkey before cooking it is one of the most common questions posed to the Department of Agriculture's Meat and Poultry hotline around holiday time, according to dietitian and hotline staffer Tina Hanes, R.D. For a fresh turkey in the refrigerator, plan to use it within one or two days. A frozen bird can last a lot longer—up to a year in the freezer, Hanes says. Uncooked pork and beef roasts can last three to five days fresh in the fridge and four to 12 months in the freezer.

Thawing meat in the fridge is the simplest way to defrost it, but make sure you leave ample time: A large turkey requires at least 24 hours for every 5 pounds. Defrosting in cold water in the sink is quicker but more labor-intensive, since you should change the water every 30 minutes. If you're crunched for time, you can defrost meat in a microwave, but cook it immediately afterward because some areas may have already started to cook. Never thaw meat on a counter, which will put it in the "danger zone" of 40° F to 140° F, where bacteria can multiply more rapidly.

And however tempting it is, experts say that you should avoid rinsing poultry (and fish) before cooking because it can splatter potentially contaminated droplets of water around your sink and kitchen.

- **Cook it enough.** In a survey of 1,011 American adults by the Consumer Reports National Research Center, 39 percent said that they had used a meat thermometer at some point in the past year. And only 8 percent said that they always used one. Even if you're an experienced cook and think you can tell by color or texture if something is done, the experts that were consulted said the same thing: You can't. Roasted turkey or duck needs to reach an internal temperature of 165° F to be safe to eat. Ham or beef should reach 145° F.

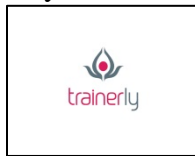
What does that poultry label really mean?

Some labels on meat or poultry don't mean much. For example, to put a "free-range" label on poultry, producers only have to allow the birds some access to open air for an unspecified amount of time each day—even if it's only 5 minutes. And "hormone-free" is meaningless on chicken or turkey since the government prohibits the use of hormones in poultry and pork. Below are five label claims that are actually worth looking for.

- "Organic"
- "American grass-fed certified"
- "Animal welfare-approved"
- "Certified humane"
- "No antibiotics used" (Also "raised without antibiotics" and "no antibiotics ever")

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