

# How to Thaw a Frozen Turkey (And How Not To)

Thawing a frozen turkey takes time, but the good news is that you've got some options if you find yourself behind schedule. You'll need to take special care when defrosting your Thanksgiving turkey, since some approaches (like defrosting it on the counter) are unsafe.

You've got at least two safe alternatives for safely thawing your frozen turkey — and a third option if your turkey is small enough. Here's what you need to know about each method:

## 1. Refrigerator Thawing

This is the easiest method for defrosting a turkey — but it also takes the longest amount of time, so you'll need to plan ahead.

- Keep the frozen turkey in its original, unopened wrapper and place breast side up in a container or tray that will prevent the turkey juices from dripping on other foods.
- Place the frozen turkey in the fridge — be sure your refrigerator temperature is set at 40 °F or below.
- You'll need to allow about 24 hours for each 4 to 5 pounds of frozen turkey you plan to thaw in the fridge.

Approximate times to defrost a whole turkey in the fridge:

- 10 pounds — 2 days plus 12 hours
- 15 pounds — 3 days plus 18 hours
- 20 pounds — 5 days
- 25 pounds — 6 days plus 6 hours

[Check out this handy online calculator to determine how long it will take to defrost your frozen turkey.](#)

Do you have to cook the frozen turkey as soon as it's thawed? No — as long as the turkey was thawed in the refrigerator. Turkey that's been defrosted in the refrigerator can be kept for an additional 1 to 2 days in the fridge before cooking.

Another plus of thawing turkey in the refrigerator: If your plans change and you decide not to cook the turkey at all, you can safely refreeze the defrosted turkey within 1 to 2 days (although there may be some loss of quality).

## 2. Cold Water Thawing

You can defrost your frozen turkey much faster in cold water. But compared to refrigerator thawing, the process will require a lot more attention on your behalf.

- Make sure the frozen turkey is in a leak-proof package or plastic bag.
- To thaw the turkey, submerge the bag in **cold** tap water — never use warm or hot water, as that can cause the outer layer of the food to heat up to a temperature where harmful bacteria begins to multiply.
- Change the water every 30 minutes, to ensure that it stays cold enough.
- Using this thawing method, you should estimate about 30 minutes of defrosting time per pound of turkey.

Approximate time to defrost a whole turkey in cold water:

- 10 pounds — 5 hours
- 15 pounds — 7 hours
- 20 pounds — 10 hours
- 25 pounds — 12 hours

If you've used the cold water method to defrost your turkey, you'll need to cook the turkey as soon as it's completely thawed.

You shouldn't refreeze raw turkey that's been defrosted in cold water. Once you've cooked the turkey, though, you can then refreeze it, if you wish.

## 3. Microwave Thawing

If your frozen turkey is tiny enough — and you're really pressed for time— you can defrost the turkey in the microwave.

- Check your owner's manual for the minutes per pound and the power level to use for thawing.
- Remove all outside wrapping.
- Place on a microwave-safe dish to catch any juices that might leak.

If you defrost your turkey in the microwave, you'll need to cook it immediately after it's thawed.

### **How Not to Defrost Your Frozen Turkey**

You should never thaw a frozen turkey on the counter at room temperature or in hot water. Under either of those methods, the outer layer of the turkey can sit between the bacteria-breeding temperatures of 40°F and 140 °F for far too long to be safe.

### **Can You Cook a Frozen Turkey?**

Yes — you can cook your turkey directly from the frozen state. It'll take longer, but you can still end up with a tasty turkey. See this article for detailed advice on how to cook a frozen turkey.

Visit the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service Web site for more information on safely defrosting turkey.

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