“Turkey Basics: Thawing and Roasting”
Turkey dinners are a part of many traditional holiday meals. If you enjoy trying something “new,” keep in mind that some of the “new or trendier” ways of preparing traditional meals may not be safe! Follow recommended thawing and cooking techniques to ensure a turkey that is not only safe from food borne illness, but tasty as well.

**Thawing:** Turkeys must be kept at a safe temperature during thawing. If turkey is allowed to thaw at a temperature above 40º F, harmful bacteria that may have been present before freezing can begin to grow again, unless proper thawing methods are used. A package of frozen meat or poultry thawing on the counter or back porch longer than 2 hours is NOT safe. Even though the center of the package may still be frozen, the outer layer of the food is in the “danger zone”—the temperature range of 40-140º F—where harmful bacteria multiply very rapidly.

There are 3 safe ways to thaw food: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave.
- If thawing a turkey in the refrigerator, plan ahead. For every 5 pounds of turkey, allow approximately 24 hours of thawing time in the refrigerator.
- You can also place a turkey, in its original wrapper (or another leaf-proof wrapper), in the sink and cover it completely with cold water to thaw. This method requires about 30 minutes per pound. The National Turkey Federation recommends changing the water every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed. Turkeys thawed by the cold water method should be cooked immediately.
- Follow the manufacturer’s instructions when thawing a turkey in the microwave. Plan to cook it immediately after thawing because some area of the turkey may become warm and begin to cook during microwave thawing.

Keep a pre-stuffed turkey in the freezer until you are ready to cook it. It should NOT be thawed, because bacteria can develop in the stuffing while the turkey thaws.

**Roasting:** It is safe to cook an unstuffed, frozen turkey. The cooking time will take at least 50% longer than recommended for a fully thawed turkey.

Set the oven temperature no lower than 325º F. Whole poultry and parts are safely cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 165º F as measured with a food thermometer. Check the internal temperature in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. For reasons of personal preference, you may choose to cook poultry to higher temperatures. For optimum safety, it is recommended to cook stuffing outside the bird; check to be sure the stuffing has also reached a minimum 165º F. If the turkey has a pop-up temperature indicator, it is also recommended a food thermometer be used to test the temperature in several places.

**Potentially UNSAFE Turkey-Cooking Methods:**
- Brown Paper Bag method: This method involves placing the turkey in a large brown paper grocery bag and cooking the bird at a very low temperature. Brown paper bags were never intended for use in cooking. The glue, ink, chemicals, and other materials used in recycling the bags are unsanitary and some bags may even contain tiny metal shavings. To make this method safe, replace the brown bag with a turkey-size, oven-
cooking bag. Roasting a turkey at temperatures below 325º F is unsafe. Be sure the oven temperature is at least 325º or higher and use a food thermometer to check for a minimum internal temperature reading of 165º.

b. Trash Bag Method: This method has a whole turkey placed in a large trash bag and marinated in salt brine, herbs, and spices for several hours at room temperature. This is an unsafe method. The trash bag (a non-food grade material) could allow chemicals and non-food colors to leach into the food. Also, a turkey should be refrigerated for any marinating processes.

c. Slow-Cooking Overnight Method: This method involves cooking a turkey at 190-200º overnight for 12-13 hours. This is scarily unsafe because a low oven temperature means the turkey will take longer to heat, which increases the risk of harmful bacteria growth and a chance that toxins will be produced and not be destroyed with further cooking. Again, do not roast a turkey at temperatures lower than 325º F.

Enjoy the upcoming holidays…and keep them safe!

If you have further questions, contact me, call our ISU “Answer Line” at (800) 262-3804 (Mon.-Fri. 9:00-Noon & 1:00-4:00), or e-mail questions to: www.extension.iastate.edu/answerline