



Food Safety Information

Stuffing and Food Safety

Regionally in the U.S., it's called by various names: stuffing, filling, or dressing. The ingredients used in stuffing are often regional as well. Usually based on a bread mixture, other ingredients such as grains, pasta, fruits, vegetables, shellfish, sausage, giblets, and nuts are also used. The stuffing is then spooned into the cavity of whole poultry or a pocket cut into a solid piece of meat, or spread on a flat piece of meat and then rolled. Because stuffing is an excellent medium for bacterial growth, it's important to handle it safely and cook it to a safe minimum internal temperature as measured with a food thermometer. Here are some common questions consumers ask.

How do you safely prepare stuffing?

Stuffing should not be prepared ahead. The dry and wet ingredients for stuffing can be prepared ahead of time and chilled. However, do not mix wet and dry ingredients until just before spooning the stuffing mixture into a poultry cavity, in/on other meat, or into a casserole. If stuffing a whole turkey, chicken, or other bird, spoon the stuffing in loosely – about 3/4 cup of stuffing per pound. The stuffing should be moist, not dry, because heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment.

How do you safely cook stuffing?

The stuffed meat, poultry, or stuffing in a casserole should be placed immediately after preparation in an oven set no lower than 325 °F. A food thermometer should be used to ensure that the stuffing reaches the safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F. If the stuffing is inside whole poultry, take the poultry out of the oven and let it stand 20 minutes before removing the stuffing. Refrigerate cooked poultry and stuffing within 2 hours. For meat containing small amounts of stuffing (for example: stuffed pork chops, veal breasts, or chicken breasts), meat and stuffing may be left intact when refrigerating the leftovers.

Can you prepare uncooked stuffing ahead of time and refrigerate or freeze it?

Do not refrigerate uncooked stuffing. If stuffing is prepared ahead of time, it must be either frozen or cooked immediately. To use cooked stuffing later, cool in shallow containers and refrigerate it within 2 hours. Use it within 3 to 4 days. Reheat the cooked stuffing to 165 °F just as for all leftovers. Do not stuff whole poultry with leftover cooked stuffing.

It is safe to freeze uncooked stuffing. Ingredients can be combined, put into a shallow container, and frozen immediately. To use it safely, do not thaw it before cooking. Cook the frozen stuffing until it reaches 165 °F.

Should you precook ingredients used in a stuffing?

If you plan to prepare stuffing using raw meat, poultry, or shellfish, you should precook the raw ingredients before stuffing the item to reduce the risk of foodborne illness from bacteria that may be found in raw ingredients.

Is it safe to use raw oysters as a stuffing ingredient?

If you plan to prepare oyster stuffing for your turkey, it is recommended that you cook the oysters prior to making the stuffing. The stuffing should be cooked to a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer.

Is premixed stuffing purchased from the store safe to eat?

If the premixed stuffing is uncooked, it is not safe and consumers should not buy the stuffing.

If the premixed stuffing is cooked and refrigerated, the stuffing would be safe to buy. At home, reheat it to 165 °F before serving.

How much stuffing do you need to stuff meat or poultry?

For small cuts of meat or poultry, such as a boneless chicken breast, pork chop, lamb breast, crown pork roast, or roulade of beef, allow about 1/2 cup of prepared stuffing per serving.

When stuffing whole poultry, allow about 1/2 to 1 cup of prepared stuffing per pound of raw poultry. The chart lists estimates of the amount of stuffing needed for whole birds.

Weight of Whole Bird	Amount of Stuffing
1 1/2 to 4 pounds	1 to 3 cups
4 to 8 pounds	3 to 6 cups
8 to 12 pounds	6 to 9 cups
12 to 16 pounds	9 to 12 cups
16 to 20 pounds	12 to 15 cups
20 to 24 pounds	15 to 18 cups
Stuffing baked in a casserole	At least 1/2 cup per person

Is it safe to use cheesecloth, a stuffing cage or stuffing bags to stuff a turkey?

Yes, these products are safe to use. Stuffing cages, stuffing bags and cheesecloth are designed to hold stuffing inside the turkey cavity while it cooks. They make it easier to remove the stuffing by simply pulling the cage handle or stuffing bag out of the turkey cavity when done. Be sure to follow manufacturer instructions and make sure the stuffing is loosely packed in the cage, bag, or cheesecloth prior to cooking the turkey. Cook the turkey immediately after stuffing. Use a food thermometer to make sure the center of the stuffing and the turkey reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F.

Is it safe to put hot stuffing into a poultry cavity?

Yes. For food safety you should not cool stuffing before spooning it into a poultry cavity. It should be mixed just before stuffing and cooking the turkey.

Is pre-stuffed poultry and meat safe to buy?

- **Frozen, Pre-Stuffed, Uncooked or Cooked Poultry (Whole):** If the packaging displays the USDA or State mark of inspection, it has been processed under controlled conditions and, therefore, is safe to buy. Store it in the freezer, and follow the package directions for safe handling and cooking.
- **DO NOT THAW** a commercially pre-stuffed frozen turkey before cooking. If this product has been placed in the refrigerator, and it has completely thawed, discard both the turkey and the stuffing. If there are ice crystals in the turkey and the stuffing is still frozen, it is safe to cook. The stuffing and the turkey should reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer.

- **Pre-Stuffed, Uncooked Meat and Poultry (Pieces):** These products are less dense than whole, stuffed poultry, so consumers can feel confident buying them. Consumers should only buy products with “best if used by” dating and directions on preparation to ensure food safety and quality. The Meat and Poultry Hotline does not recommend microwaving stuffed meat and poultry products. Some microwave ovens do not cook food evenly and “cold spots” remain, especially with the density provided by the stuffing.
- **Pre-Stuffed, Cooked Turkey (Whole):** If you are going to buy a pre-stuffed, cooked turkey, it should be purchased hot. To keep hot foods safe, keep them at 140 °F or above. Bacteria grow rapidly between 40 and 140 °F. Discard the turkey and stuffing if left at room temperature longer than 2 hours; 1 hour in air temperatures above 90 °F. If you plan to eat at a later time, food should be divided into smaller portions or pieces, placed in shallow containers, and refrigerated. Reheat turkey and stuffing to a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer.

Is it safe to stuff a turkey breast?

Yes, it is safe to stuff a turkey breast. Stuff just before cooking and follow the same guidelines as for stuffing a whole turkey. For more even cooking, it is recommended you cook your stuffing outside the breast in a casserole. Use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of the stuffing. The center should reach the safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F.

Can you stuff a turkey that will be deep-fat fried?

Do not stuff turkeys or other poultry to be deep-fat fried. Because whole poultry fries very rapidly, sufficient heat may not be conducted to the center of the stuffing to destroy any bacteria that could be present.

Why is it essential to use a food thermometer when cooking stuffed meat or poultry?

Cooking stuffed poultry, pork chops, and other meat can be somewhat riskier than cooking them unstuffed. Bacteria can survive in stuffing that has not reached the safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F, possibly resulting in foodborne illness. Even if the meat itself has reached this temperature, the stuffing may not have reached a temperature in all areas sufficient to destroy foodborne bacteria.

If stuffing does not reach 165 °F when the meat itself is done, further cooking will be required for the stuffing to reach 165 °F.

For optimal safety and uniform doneness, cook stuffing separately.

Can you make stuffing in a slow cooker?

It is safe to make stuffing in a slow cooker if you follow these guidelines:

- The stuffing needs to be very moist.
- Fill the slow cooker loosely no more than 2/3 full.
- The lid should fit tightly on the slow cooker.
- Start cooking on the high setting for at least 1 hour before reducing the setting to low.
- Cook until the center of the stuffing reaches 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer.
- If these guidelines have not been followed, discard the stuffing.
- Consult your slow cooker manual for approximate times.
- NOTE: Never place frozen stuffing or other frozen food in a slow cooker.

Is it safe to cook a stuffed turkey by the foil-wrapped method?

Yes. Preheat the oven to 450 °F. Tear off a sheet of 18-inch wide heavy duty aluminum foil that is 2 1/2 times longer than the turkey. Place turkey, breast side up, in center of foil sheet. Stuff the turkey loosely. Bring the long sides of foil over turkey; close loosely by overlapping the ends. Turn up short sides of foil to hold in juices. Do not seal airtight. Place foil-

wrapped turkey in a roasting pan that is at least 2 inches deep. Insert a food thermometer through the foil into the stuffing. The center of the stuffing must reach a minimum internal temperature of 165 °F. To brown the turkey, open and turn back the foil 30 minutes before roasting is finished. For easy slicing, cover the turkey with foil and let stand 15 minutes after removing from oven. For estimated cooking times, see the cooking chart at the end of this publication.

Is it safe to cook a stuffed turkey in an oven cooking bag?

Yes. Use only oven cooking bags manufactured and recommended for cooking meat and poultry. For stuffed turkey, add 30 minutes to the roasting times recommended for non-stuffed turkeys. The center of the stuffing must reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer before removing the stuffing from the poultry. For estimated cooking times, see the cooking chart at the end of this publication.

Is it safe to microwave stuffed meat or poultry?

It is safe to microwave stuffed pieces of meat, but cooking whole, stuffed poultry in a microwave oven is not recommended. Because food cooks so quickly in a microwave oven, the stuffing might not have enough time to reach the safe minimum internal temperature needed to destroy harmful bacteria.

How can I safely prepare and cook a turducken?

A "turducken" is a deboned stuffed chicken inside a deboned stuffed duck inside a deboned stuffed turkey. When preparing a turducken, safe food handling, cooking, and storage are essential to preventing foodborne illness. Make sure the birds and stuffing are not out of the refrigerator in the "Danger Zone" (temperatures between 40 and 140 °F where bacteria grow rapidly) for more than 2 hours while assembling the turducken.

Roast the turducken immediately after assembly in an oven set no lower than 325 °F. Use a food thermometer to ensure that all layers of the turducken and stuffing reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F. The thermometer should be placed in the center of the thickest parts of the turducken.

How do you handle leftover turducken?

Slice and serve the cooked turducken within 2 hours after cooking. Refrigerate any leftovers in a shallow container within 2 hours of cooking. Perishable food should not be left out more than 2 hours at room temperature (1 hour when the temperature is 90 °F or above).

If it won't be served within 2 hours, slice and cut it into smaller portions before putting it in a shallow container in the refrigerator. A whole cooked turducken may not cool to a safe temperature within the time needed to prevent bacterial growth.

Use within 3 to 4 days after cooking or freeze it for longer storage.

How do you handle a stuffed turkey purchased with a ready-prepared turkey dinner?

- If the dinner is picked up or delivered HOT, the food must be kept at 140 °F or above if eaten within 2 hours. It's not a good idea to try and keep the foods hot longer than 2 hours because they will dry out.
- If holding the food longer than 2 hours, remove all stuffing from the turkey cavity, divide the turkey into smaller pieces, and refrigerate everything in separate, shallow containers. Reheat the meat and stuffing to 165 °F.
- When picking up a cooked turkey dinner that has been chilled, do not accept a whole turkey with stuffing inside. If the turkey and stuffing were cooked and refrigerated separately, both should be safe. Keep these cold foods cold and refrigerate them immediately upon arrival at home (always within 2 hours). Serve the meal within 3 to 4 days.
- Do not reheat a whole cooked turkey. Instead, carve the cooked meat and reheat the slices or pieces.
- If the cooked turkey has a USDA inspection seal on the packaging, it has been processed under controlled conditions. Follow the package directions for reheating and storing this product.

When should you remove stuffing from a hot, cooked turkey or chicken?

The poultry is safely cooked when the food thermometer reaches a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. The center of the stuffing should also reach 165 °F. Let the bird stand 20 minutes before removing the stuffing and carving the bird.

Can you refrigerate or freeze a cooked whole turkey with the stuffing inside?

USDA does not recommend refrigerating a whole, cooked turkey with stuffing inside. For information on this food safety issue, please call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1 (888) MPHOTline or 1 (888) 674-6854.

How do you handle leftover stuffed poultry?

For stuffing in whole poultry or a whole, bone-in turkey breast, remove all stuffing from the cavity. Place it in a sealed container and store it in the refrigerator. Use or freeze the stuffing or stuffed poultry parts within 3 to 4 days. The leftover stuffing may be reheated in the microwave or in an oven set no lower than 325 °F. Use a food thermometer to make sure the center of the stuffing reaches 165 °F.

How do you handle leftover stuffed, small pieces of meat?

A small amount of stuffing in meat (for example, stuffed pork chops, a beef roulade, or a lamb breast) may be refrigerated without removing the stuffing from the meat. Use or freeze the leftover stuffed meat within 3 to 4 days. The leftovers may be reheated in the microwave or in an oven set no lower than 325 °F. Use a food thermometer to make sure the stuffed meat reaches 165 °F in the center.

Can you reheat leftover stuffing in a slow cooker?

Leftovers should not be reheated in a slow cooker due to the length of time it takes for the leftover food to pass through the "Danger Zone," the temperatures between 40 °F and 140 °F. Reheat the stuffing in an oven set no lower than 325 °F or in a microwave oven. Once heated, leftover stuffing may be served in a preheated slow cooker on the buffet.

STUFFED MEAT COOKING TIMES

A food thermometer should be used to ensure that the stuffing reaches the safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F. For approximate cooking times for use in meal planning, see the following chart compiled from various resources.

TYPE OF MEAT	SIZE	COOKING TIME	METHOD
BEEF, STUFFED			
Flank steak, stuffed and rolled	1 1/2 to 2 pounds	350 °F for 1 to 1 1/4 hours	Spread stuffing over seasoned flank steak. Roll meat and tie or fasten edge with toothpick. Brown in skillet before roasting in oven.
Round steak, stuffed and rolled	2-ounce steaks, cut 1/4-inch thick	Cover pan and simmer in liquid, turning occasionally, about 40 minutes	Stuff and secure individual rolls with toothpicks.
VEAL, STUFFED			
Veal cutlet, stuffed and rolled	4 (1/4-inch thick) veal cutlets, about 1 pound total	Cover pan and simmer in liquid for 15 to 20 minutes	Flatten cutlet between sheets of plastic wrap. Discard the plastic. Stuff and secure with toothpicks.
Veal breast	2-1/2 to 3 pounds	Cover pan and simmer in liquid 1 1/2 to 1-3/4 hours or until veal is fork-tender.	Add stuffing and roll; tie with string. Brown in a skillet.
Veal roast, boneless, stuffed and rolled	4 pounds	Roast at 325 °F for 2 hours	Add stuffing and roll; tie with string.
LAMB, STUFFED			
Crown roast	4 to 6 pounds	Roast at 375 °F for 1 to 1 1/2 hours	Add stuffing after 30 minutes of cooking.
Leg of lamb, butterflied	4 to 5 pounds	Roast at 375 °F for 1 1/2 to 1 3/4 hours	Turn roast upside down after 60 minutes.
Leg of lamb, boned	6 pounds	Roast at 325 °F for 3 hours	Add stuffing and roll; tie with string.
PORK, STUFFED			
Pork loin chops, boneless	1 1/4 inch thick	375 °F	Bake, uncovered, 35 to 45 minutes
Pork Tenderloins	1 pound each	425 °F	20 minutes
Pork loin, boneless	2 1/2 to 3 lbs	375 °F	35 to 45 minutes
Crown Roast	16 ribs (8 to 9 pounds)	350 °F for 18 to 20 minutes per pound	Add stuffing to center of roast after 1 1/2 hours.

STUFFED POULTRY COOKING TIMES

Cook poultry and stuffing to a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer. For whole poultry, check the internal temperature in the thigh, the wing, the thickest part of the breast, and the center of the stuffing. For reasons of personal preference, consumers may choose to cook poultry to higher temperatures.

TURKEY, STUFFED	SIZE	OVEN TEMPERATURE	COOKING TIME
Oven, open pan (breast-side up; tent breast with foil until the last hour)	8 to 12 pounds	325 °F	3 to 3 1/2 hours
	12 to 14 pounds		3 1/2 to 4 hours
	14 to 18 pounds		4 to 4 1/4 hours
	18 to 20 pounds		4 1/4 to 4 3/4 hours
	20 to 24 pounds		4 3/4 to 5 1/4 hours
Foil Wrapped (wrapped in heavy duty foil)	8 to 12 pounds	450 °F	2 to 2 3/4 hours
	12 to 16 pounds		2 3/4 to 3 1/4 hours
	16 to 20 pounds		3 1/4 to 3 3/4 hours
	20 to 24 pounds		3 3/4 to 4 1/4 hours
Oven Cooking Bag (follow directions in package)	8 to 12 pounds	350 °F	2 to 2 1/2 hours
	12 to 16 pounds		2 1/2 to 3 hours
	16 to 20 pounds		3 to 3 1/2 hours
	20 to 24 pounds		3 1/2 to 4 hours
TURKEY BREAST, STUFFED			
Open pan (breast-side up; tent breast with foil until the last hour)	4 to 6 pounds	325 °F	Not usually applicable
	6 to 8 pounds	325 °F	2½ to 3½ hours
CHICKEN, STUFFED	SIZE	OVEN TEMPERATURE	COOKING TIME
Boneless breast	4 to 6 ounces each	375 °F	20 to 30 minutes total
Whole broiler-fryer	2 1/2 to 4 1/2 pounds	350 °F	1 1/2 to 1 3/4 hours
Whole roasting chicken	5 to 7 pounds	350 °F	2 1/2 to 2 3/4 hours
CORNISH HENS, STUFFED			
	Whole	18 to 24 ounces	350 °F

Food Safety Questions?

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at **1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)**; TTY: 1-800-256-7072.



The Hotline is open year-round Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish). Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at www.fsis.usda.gov.

Send E-mail questions to MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov.

Ask Karen!

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7



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