

## **Don't be a "Turkey" When It Comes to Food Safety**

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Summer is now officially over, the kids are back in school, and most of us have settled into a routine that will carry us through to December. One of the bright spots to which we can look forward is Thanksgiving. This is truly one of my favourite holidays. It is a time to spend with family members and reflect on just how fortunate we really are as we sit down to enjoy a traditional Thanksgiving meal. For many of us, this includes a turkey or other "bird".

Thanksgiving also provides a gentle reminder to me about safe food handling practices. Bacteria and other microorganisms are all around us, and in no way am I picking on turkeys. The turkeys we buy for our holiday meals are raised under strict conditions and high standards are in place to ensure the safety of the consumer. Turkeys are being used here primarily for example purposes.

It is generally in the home where the problems can, and often do occur. As such, there are some simple, common sense guidelines that should be followed to avoid these problems. It is extremely important for us to recognize that there are potential risks through improper preparation of many of the foods we eat. These risks are present on a year-round basis and not just during holiday meals. If we acknowledge this simple fact, we are well on our way to better food safety practices.

Let's get back to "talking turkey". Most turkeys are purchased frozen and the first area of concern is in the defrosting process. A fifteen or twenty pound turkey does not thaw instantaneously. The Turkey Farmers of Ontario and the Turkey Farmers of Canada caution that turkeys should never be thawed at room temperature, and that once thawed, the turkey should be cooked immediately, or kept refrigerated before cooking. Leaving a turkey out on the counter to thaw can create numerous potential problems since the skin surface will approach room temperature even though the innermost portions remain frozen. They also state that it takes approximately five hours per pound (ten hours per kilogram) to thaw a turkey under refrigerated conditions (typically 4°C). This means that it would take four days for a frozen 20 lb (9 kg) turkey to thaw completely in the refrigerator.

According to the two Turkey Farmers groups, a quick method for thawing is to place the wrapped frozen turkey in a sink and cover it completely with cold water. With frequent changes of water, it should take about one hour per pound (or two hours per kilogram) to thaw a frozen turkey. This would mean that it would still take almost a whole day to thaw a 20 pound frozen turkey.

Cross-contamination of kitchen surfaces is another serious concern and the steps to

avoid any problems are incredibly simple. When preparing a turkey for roasting, it usually comes in contact with the counter top, cutting board, or sink. Numerous utensils may also contact the uncooked turkey during stuffing. The turkey is then roasted at 350°F or more for several hours. Cooking not only creates the most pleasant aromas imaginable, but it serves to destroy any harmful microorganisms which may have been originally present. If we take the turkey from the oven and carve it on the same cutting board and counter area where the raw turkey was originally prepared, we run the risk of re-introducing any of these microorganisms that may be lingering on the uncleaned surfaces.

Basically, a thorough cleaning of all dishes, utensils, and contact surfaces with an appropriate commercial disinfectant or dilute chlorine bleach solution is all that is needed to ensure a holiday free from the worries of food-related illnesses.

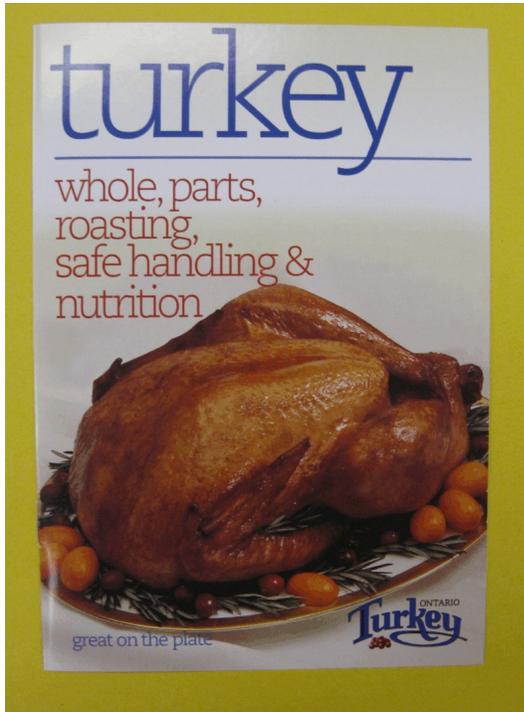
Cross-contamination is not just limited to holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas. We also see it happening time and time again at backyard barbecues when the “chef” places the cooked hamburgers on the same plate that was used to bring the raw patties from the kitchen. While thorough cooking will produce a safe burger, placing the cooked patties back on the same plate that was used for the raw meat can re-introduce potentially harmful microorganisms back into the food. For this reason, you should always use a fresh, clean plate for the cooked burgers and immediately return the plate used for the raw meat to the kitchen for washing.

The next time you are working in the kitchen, take note of how many different things you touch between the times you wash your hands. Then, imagine that your hands are spreading “germs” onto each surface that you touch - which may not be far from the truth. You will be astonished at just how many things you could possibly contaminate without even realizing it. There is absolutely no need to become paranoid about food safety. However, a little awareness and good hygienic practices will go a long way to ensuring safe and enjoyable meals.

For helpful hints, and interesting recipes, you can consult the Turkey Farmers of Ontario website ([www.turkeyrecipes.ca](http://www.turkeyrecipes.ca)). Information on how to contact them directly is also included there. When I contacted them, I was extremely pleased with the response they provided.

For specific information on the safe preparation of turkeys, the Turkey Farmers of Canada offer excellent guidance on their website ([www.turkeyfarmersofcanada.ca](http://www.turkeyfarmersofcanada.ca)). All aspects of thawing, cooking, carving, storage, and safe food handling are covered there. They even provide advice on carving and barbecuing, with special sections on beers and wines that complement turkey. All you need to do to access this information is click on the “Prep and Serving” box at the top right of their home page.

Have a happy and safe Thanksgiving!



**Examples of information available from the Turkey Farmers of Ontario**