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COUNTY

Public Health
Environmental Health Services



Handling and Storing Chicken and Turkey Safely

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“Do bacteria from poultry contaminate the counter and everything they contact? Can bacteria pass from object to object or into cuts on my hands?”

Poultry, like all raw food of animal origin, carries salmonella and other bacteria. It should be handled carefully to prevent cross contamination. Never let raw poultry or its juices contact cooked food or food that will be eaten raw, such as salad ingredients.

Salmonella bacteria must be *eaten* to cause illness. They cannot enter the body through a cut on your hand. Refrigeration slows the growth of salmonella and thorough cooking destroys it.

“After I left the grocery, I did more shopping. The turkey roast was in my van for 3 hours on a 90° day. Is it safe?”

Absolutely not. Don't leave poultry in a hot car for more than 30 minutes. The supermarket should be your last stop before heading home. Perishable food, like turkey, should be the last you choose before checkout. Unload perishables from your car first and refrigerate them immediately.

“Sometimes when I buy chicken, it looks frozen but by the time I get it home, it is defrosted. Is it safe to freeze?”

Yes. What you have observed is only frozen surface tissues. The entire chicken is not frozen. Processors quickly chill and store fresh chicken at 28° to 32°F to prevent the rapid growth of bacteria and increase its shelf-life.

“I've had a thawed turkey breast in the refrigerator 8 days. Is it safe to cook? I'm 90 and I don't want to get sick.”

Senior citizens, pregnant women, very young children and people who suffer from chronic illnesses are especially vulnerable to foodborne bacteria.

But for persons of any age, 8 days is too long to refrigerate raw or cooked poultry. The safe time limit for refrigerating raw poultry is 1-2 days; 3-4 days if it's cooked.

Your turkey may have begun to spoil. Even without spoilage indicators like an off-odor or sticky surface, harmful bacteria may be present. Discard it.

“I'm concerned about the dark color of meat around the bones of chicken. How do you prevent it?”

First, it's perfectly safe to eat chicken meat that turns dark during cooking. The darkening around bones occurs primarily in young broiler-fryers 7 to 9 weeks old. Since their bones have not calcified completely, pigment from the bone marrow can seep through the porous bones. When the chicken is cooked, the pigment turns dark. Try buying a more mature 5 to 7 pound baking hen or debone chicken.



POULTRY HANDLING AND STORING TIPS

1. Store raw poultry in the refrigerator (40°F) 1 or 2 days only before cooking or freezing. Store whole birds in the freezer (0°F) up to 1 year; parts up to 9 months; giblets 3 to 4 months.
2. Before cooking poultry, throw away packaging and rinse product under cool running water. Cut on a nonporous cutting board.
3. Wash board, utensils and counter with detergent and hot water immediately.
4. Set oven temperature no lower than 325°F. For doneness, cook breasts to an internal temperature of 170°F and dark meat or whole birds to 180°F, or until juices run clear and flesh is tender.
5. Refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours after cooking.