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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: NOVEMBER 12, 2018**

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## **PSHD and USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline Offers Food Safety Tips for Thanksgiving**

The Plainville Southington Health District (PSHD) knows that getting the turkey and all its side dishes done safely requires careful planning and attention to detail, from preparation to clean-up. Preventing the growth of dangerous microorganisms and their toxins in foods are the key to reducing the millions of foodborne illnesses and thousands of deaths that occur each year. So if this is your first time preparing a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, have no fear. The United States Department of Agriculture Meat and Poultry Hotline is available to help

One of the best sources of information about food safety is the Meat and Poultry Hotline of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). Each year about this time the hotline is flooded with questions about how to safely prepare a Thanksgiving turkey – an indication of just how nervous many consumers are about foodborne illnesses. To make planning and preparing a Thanksgiving turkey easier for Plainville and Southington cooks, PSHD would like to pass along some of the latest holiday food safety tips from the USDA hotline.

## **Getting Off to a Safe Start: Defrosting the Turkey**

There are three safe ways to defrost a turkey (and other foods for that matter):

1. In the refrigerator
2. In cold water, and
3. In the microwave.

The preferred – and easiest – way to defrost a turkey is in the refrigerator. Place the bird in a shallow pan to catch the drippings, and plan for 24 hours of defrost time for each 5 pounds. Defrosting a turkey in a refrigerator with glass shelves may take longer than in a refrigerator with wire shelves.

For those who lack time or don't have enough room in the refrigerator, there's the cold water method. First, make sure the turkey is in a leak-proof package or plastic bag. If the bag leaks, bacteria from the surrounding environment could be introduced into a food. Also, the turkey's tissues could absorb the water resulting in a watery product. Completely submerge the turkey in cold tap water (70 degrees or cooler), changing the water every 30 minutes. You should allow about 30 minutes per pound, so a 20-pound bird can be thawed in about 10 hours.

If your turkey defrosts faster than you think by either of these methods, it will be safe in the refrigerator for another one or two days – the same storage time as for fresh turkey.

A turkey that is not too large can be defrosted in the microwave. Check your oven manual for defrost times and power settings. Be sure to rotate the bird often. Plan to cook a microwave thawed turkey immediately, because some areas of the turkey may become warm and begin to cook during defrosting.

### **Cooking Your Turkey: To Stuff or Not to Stuff?**

The advice from the USDA is not to stuff your turkey unless you plan to use a meat thermometer. Today's turkeys are cooking faster than ever because they have higher proportions of breast meat, which cooks faster than dark meat. While the meat may be done and safely cooked, your stuffing may not have had enough cooking time to reach a temperature high enough to kill dangerous bacteria.

So if you are cooking a stuffed bird, use your meat thermometer twice. First to make sure the turkey thigh meat has reached 165 degrees, and then again to ensure that the temperature at the center of the stuffing is at 165 degrees. This holds true even if you are using a turkey with a "pop-up" temperature indicator. Mix your stuffing ingredients at the last minute, stuff the turkey loosely, and place right in the oven. The stuffing should be moist, not dry, since heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment. **Be sure to clean your thermometers in between each use.**

A safer option is to cook your stuffing outside your turkey in a greased, covered casserole. Your turkey will cook more uniformly, and faster, too.

## **Safe Cooking and Leftovers**

To prepare your turkey for roasting, remove the wrappings and pull out the neck and giblets. Rinse the turkey and cavity with cold running water and pat dry with paper towels. Set the oven temperature no lower than 325 degrees – preheating is not necessary. Place your turkey breast side up on a flat wire rack in a shallow roasting pan. Be sure to clean any surface that has come in contact with the raw meat or juices with soap and hot water.

Many factors may affect the roasting time of a whole bird, so any cooking time you see on a chart is just approximate. Once again, it's best to use a meat thermometer – not only does it ensure your turkey has reached a safe temperature, it can prevent overcooking, too. Your turkey is done and safe when the thermometer temperature reaches 165 degrees in the innermost part of the thigh. Juices should run clear. Cook until the center of the stuffing inside the bird or in a casserole reaches 165 degrees. Let the turkey stand for 20 minutes before removing all stuffing and carving.

When your meal is done, plan to store the turkey and other foods away in the refrigerator within two hours. Carve the meat off the bones. Refrigerate leftovers in small, shallow containers so they will cool quickly. Use leftover turkey and stuffing within five days.

Have more questions? The USDA hotline has the answers, and it's free. For more information call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) or visit [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov).

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The mission of the Plainville Southington Health District is to preserve, protect, promote, and improve the quality of life in a healthy environment through the prevention of disease, ongoing health education opportunities and the enhancement of the well-being of its residents.