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TURKEY TIPS FOR THE HOLIDAYS
From the Westchester County Health Department

The Westchester County Department of Health is reminding residents to protect themselves and their loved-ones from foodborne-illness this Thanksgiving by following a few turkey preparation precautions.

"The USDA has estimated that 13 percent of turkeys contain salmonella, which is a bacterium that can cause serious illness, particularly in those with weak immune systems," said Dr. Joshua Lipsman, Commissioner of Health for Westchester County. "These bacteria must be destroyed by thorough cooking before eating the turkey."

Persons infected with salmonella may develop diarrhea, fever, and abdominal cramps 12 to 72 hours after infection. Healthy people may recover without treatment within four to seven days. However, the illness can be severe enough to require hospitalization and can even be fatal without treatment. The elderly, infants, and those with impaired immune systems are at greatest risk of severe illness. The Westchester County Health Department is offering the following suggestions for avoiding illness from salmonella in turkeys.

If you use a frozen turkey, there are three ways to thaw it safely — in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave oven. Do not simply leave a turkey out of the refrigerator to thaw. The outer part of the bird might grow dangerous bacteria while the inner part is still frozen.

If thawed in the refrigerator, a 12 to 16 pound turkey will take three to four days to properly thaw. A 16 to 20 pound turkey will take four to five days. Keep the bird in a dish to catch the juices and keep them from contaminating other foods in the refrigerator. To speed things up, you can thaw the turkey in cold water. Allow 30 minutes per pound to thaw by this method. Wrap the turkey well to keep water out and then submerge it completely in cold water. Change the water every 30 minutes.

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Turkeys may also be thawed in a microwave oven. Carefully follow instructions provided by the manufacturers of the oven and the turkey. Remove all wrappings and anything inside the turkey. Place the turkey on a dish to catch the juices. If you use the microwave or the water thawing options, cook the turkey immediately after thawing.

If you decide to use a fresh turkey, it should be bought only one or two days before cooking and stored in the refrigerator. Fresh pre-stuffed turkeys are not recommended.

Always follow the product manufacturer's cooking and storage instructions. Cooking times and temperatures are both very important for ensuring that harmful bacteria are destroyed. To roast the turkey safely:

- Set your oven to at least 325 °F.
- Cook the turkey on a rack in a shallow roasting pan.
- For optimum safety, it is better to cook stuffing outside the bird in a casserole.
- Check the internal temperature of the turkey in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast with a food thermometer. The minimum internal temperature at those points should reach 165 °F. This should not be confused with the oven temperature, which should be at least 325 °F. Even if your turkey has a "pop-up" temperature indicator, it is recommended that you also use a food thermometer.
- Follow the turkey manufacturer's instructions for cooking times. Usually, an 8 to 12 pound unstuffed turkey would take about three hours to cook at 325 °F if properly thawed.

Remember to always wash hands, utensils and any surfaces that are in contact with turkey juices with soap and water to remove bacteria. Refrigerate leftovers within two hours of cooking. Break the leftovers into smaller pieces and refrigerate in shallow pans to speed up cooling.

A little care will ensure that your Thanksgiving turkey is memorable for the right reasons, not the wrong ones.

For more information, please call the Westchester County Health Department at (914) 813-5000 or visit the Health Department website at www.westchestergov.com/health.