

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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Turkey Taboos!

Coldwater, MI. Each year, chefs and foodies alike circulate new ideas about how to prepare your 'thanksgiving bird.' They promise tastier, moister, savorier and/or sweeter versions of turkey that will wow your guests and raise the bar for future dinners. As a result, many people have ventured to try all sorts of new and/or unique ways for preparing their dinners. While some of these ideas may result in rave reviews, they may also result in dinner disasters. The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency recommends avoiding the following turkey taboos when making your annual feast:

- **Do not thaw your bird a room temperature.** Bacteria that can lead to illness can grow in temperatures between 40°F to 140°F. Properly thawing your bird in the refrigerator, allowing one day of thaw time for every 4 to 5 pounds, is the best way to make sure your bird will be both thawed and safe. Be sure to place it in a container to catch any raw juices that may drip during thawing. You can also thaw your turkey by placing it in cold water but be sure to change the water every 30 minutes. If you choose this method, you will need at least one hour of thaw time for every two pounds of bird.
- **Do not cook your turkey or your turkey breast in a crockpot.** Crockpots are made to cook foods at lower temperatures for longer periods of time. In the case of turkeys, this could provide a ripe environment for bacterial growth within the inner cavity. Turkeys and all poultries should be cooked at a minimum temperature of 325°F, in order to assure safe consumption.

- **Do not cook your turkey in a roaster overnight.** While Grandma's recipe may have called for cooking your bird overnight, cooking any poultry at temperatures below 325°F is dangerous and can lead to food poisoning.
- **Do not microwave your whole turkey.** Microwaves typically cook unevenly, leaving some spots undone and other spots overdone. This inconsistent cooking technique could result in a poor tasting, as well as a disease producing, entre.
- **If you must stuff your bird, do not stuff it the night before.** Stuffing the bird that far ahead provides more opportunity for cross contamination and bacterial growth. Even if the bread dressing heats to an acceptable temperature, harmful toxins that are not destroyed by heat can still be present. Also, a stuffed bird is more likely to be undercooked, which increases the risk for food poisoning. Instead, consider preparing the dressing in a separate pan and cooking it next to the turkey in the oven. Not only will it save you time, it may save you a trip to the doctor's.
- **Do not cook your turkey in a brown bag.** Brown bags are not sanitized. Brown bags easily burn and can cause fires. Brown bags contain glue that can produce toxins when heated that can leach into the turkey and lead to significant health problems. Purchase an approved cooking bag at the grocery store if you want to lock in the juices and/or save on cooking time.
- **Also, do not brine your turkey in a plastic garbage bag.** Plastic garbage bags are not sanitized. Plastic bags contain chemicals that can leach into the turkey, as well. Again, a store bought cooking bag approved for cooking is the way to go.

According to Steve Todd, Health Officer for the tri-county health department, "Of course, it's also important to check your turkey to be sure it is properly done. We always recommend using a meat thermometer. Check the innermost part of the thigh, wing and thickest part of the breast. When the internal temperature in these areas reaches 165°F, your turkey is done!" Finally, be careful of cross contamination. This can occur when your bird comes in contact with other food and/or appliances in the kitchen. Steve adds "Be very careful to wash all surfaces, equipment and utensils that have come in contact with your turkey with hot, soapy water prior to preparing your other recipes to avoid cross contaminating foods with harmful salmonella or campylobacter bacteria."

The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency has posted a FAQ on its website which contains additional information to help you prepare a safe and healthy Thanksgiving meal – one that is sure to make both you and your guests truly thankful. Check it out at www.bhsj.org. Click on FAQ to learn more!

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