WASHINGTON, Nov. 21, 2016 - This week millions of Americans will gather family and friends around the dinner table to give thanks for the blessings and fortunes of the year. For those honored with preparing the food on this special day it may be the largest meal they cook all year. Its centerpiece—the turkey—is the largest dish most cooks ever encounter, and many are not experienced at roasting one. “Unsafe handling and undercooking of your turkey can lead to serious foodborne illness,” explains Al Almanza, Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). “Turkeys may contain Salmonella and Campylobacter, harmful pathogens that are only destroyed by properly preparing and cooking a turkey.”

Consumers should follow certain steps to reduce the risk of foodborne illness, and according to Deputy Under Secretary Almanza, “those handling and cooking Thanksgiving meals should be aware of the resources available to them.” The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is releasing 5 tips for a food safe Thanksgiving to help anyone preparing for Thanksgiving dinner.

Tip 1: Don’t Wash That Turkey

USDA does not recommend washing raw meat and poultry before cooking. Bacteria in raw meat and poultry juices can be spread around your kitchen up to three feet away. Cooking (baking, broiling, boiling, frying and grilling) to the right temperature kills the bacteria, so washing meat and poultry is not necessary.

Tip 2: Use the refrigerator, the cold-water method, or the microwave to defrost a frozen turkey

There are three safe ways to defrost a turkey: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave oven. Thawing food in the refrigerator is the safest method because the turkey will defrost at a consistent, safe temperature. This method takes some time, so allow one day for each five pounds of weight. The other two methods (cold water and microwave) must be done immediately before you start cooking the turkey, so you’ll have to wait until Thanksgiving morning. Cold water and microwave thawing are great methods to use if your bird did not entirely defrost in the refrigerator.

Tip 3: Use a meat thermometer

The only way to determine if a turkey (or any meat, poultry or seafood for that matter) is cooked is to check its internal temperature with a food thermometer. A whole turkey should be checked in three locations: the innermost part of the thigh, the innermost part of the wing, and the thickest part of the breast. Your thermometer should register 165 °F in each of these places. The juices rarely run clear at this temperature, and when they do the bird is often overcooked. Using the food thermometer is the best way to ensure your turkey is cooked, but not overdone.

Tip 4: Don’t store food outside even if it’s cold
Storing food outside isn’t food safe for two reasons: (1) animals and (2) temperature variation. Animals both wild and domesticated can get into food stored outside, consuming it or contaminating it. Just like your car gets warm in the summer, a plastic food storage container in the sun can heat up into the danger zone (above 40 °F). The best way to keep that extra Thanksgiving food at a safe temperature (below 40 °F) is in a cooler with ice.

**Tip 5: Leftovers are good in the refrigerator for up to 4 days**

Cut the turkey off the bone and refrigerate it as soon as you can, within 2 hours of the turkey coming out of the oven. Leftovers will last for 4 days in the refrigerator, so if you know you won’t use them right away pack them into freezer bags or airtight containers and freeze. For best quality use your leftover turkey within 4 months. After that they will still be safe, but can dry out or lose flavor.

*Want additional food safety tips?*

If you have questions about your Thanksgiving dinner, you can call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) to talk to a food safety expert. Last November they answered more than 3,000 calls about Thanksgiving dinner. You can also chat live with a food safety expert at AskKaren.gov, available from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. ET, Monday through Friday, in English and Spanish.

If you need help on Thanksgiving Day, the Meat & Poultry Hotline phone line is available from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. ET.

Consumers with more food safety questions can visit FoodSafety.gov to learn more about how to safely select, thaw, and prepare a turkey. FSIS will provide Thanksgiving food safety information during November on Twitter, @USDAFoodSafety, and on Facebook, at Facebook.com/FoodSafety.gov.