

## How to Cook a Turkey

When the holidays roll around, it's a good idea to learn **how to cook a turkey**. After all, if turkey is on the menu for Thanksgiving or Christmas, you want it to be perfect, right?

Cooking turkey can be kind of scary. If you have lots of guests coming over, you want to impress them. But there always seems to be a lot going on, which means you can't give all your attention to your cooking turkey.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Learning how to cook a turkey is definitely tricky, but **when you understand what's going on** and know the tricks, you'll find that it's not so hard after all!

In this article, I'll show you how to cook a turkey so that it's perfectly moist and tastes awesome. I'll cover four topics:

- [Choosing the Right Turkey](#)
- [Choosing the Right Roasting Pan](#)
- [Preparation and Seasoning](#)
- [Cooking the Turkey](#)

## Choosing the Right Turkey

The first step to learning how to cook a turkey is **picking the right turkey**. And there are a few things to keep in mind when you're selecting a turkey.

### Size

You want to be sure that you have **enough turkey for everyone**, and some leftovers, too!

- If you count about 1lb per person, you'll have a medium amount of leftovers. For more leftovers, count a bit more.
- If you're buying a frozen pre-stuffed turkey, keep in mind that the stuffing is counted in the weight.
- Smaller turkeys tend to be more tender than a really big one, so you might want to think about getting two small ones instead of a big one, if presenting a big roast turkey isn't an issue.

## Enhancements

Some turkeys have been **enhanced**. That means that they've been specially treated to make them juicier or better tasting.

- A lot of times, you don't know exactly how they've been treated. They could be brined, or self-basting, or any number of things. But generally, it means a tastier turkey.
- When you've learned how to cook a turkey, you can do all of those enhancements yourself, with as good or better results. And then you know *exactly* what's in your turkey - all natural goodness. Keep reading to find out more.

## Type

There are a **few kinds of turkeys** you can get, like heritage, organic, or just a regular turkey.

- Heritage turkeys are raised to have a more natural lifestyle, closer to wild turkeys. They have a richer taste, but it can be kind of gamey if you're not used to it.
- Organic turkeys have been raised according to certain agricultural practices, which generally involves more natural feeding, fewer chemicals, and that sort of thing.
- It's up to you what you like best and what fits your budget. I think they're all tasty. I'd feel a bit better getting an organic turkey, because I know it probably had a better life, but I can't always get one.

That's pretty much all you need to think about when picking a turkey. If you have a brand you know you like, then that's a great choice!

And now, let's move on and find out a bit more about how to cook a turkey.

## Choosing The Right Pan

Alright, let's move on to step 2 of learning how to cook a turkey — **picking the right roasting pan**. Here are the things you want to look for in a roasting pan.

### Weight

Your roasting pan should be **solid enough** to safely hold a turkey, and light enough that you can lift both the pan and turkey easily.

- Some roasting pans are really flimsy, like foil pans. They can actually tear under the weight of a turkey, and should always be used on a baking sheet to avoid accidents.
- Stainless steel, anodized aluminum or stainless coated aluminum are really strong and probably won't warp. They make good roasting pans. But they can be on the heavy side.
- Porcelain covered steel, like a Graniteware roasting pan, is a lot lighter. It can easily handle medium sized turkeys. It's not as sturdy as stainless, but it gets the job done.

### Size

Knowing how to cook a turkey is about finding the right size roasting pan, too.

- Your roasting pan needs to be big enough so that the turkey fits inside completely, with at least an inch of space between it and the sides.
  - That way, all the drippings end up inside the pan. That gives you a great basis for a gravy, and avoids any accidents.
  - Having a bit of space between the pan and the turkey is important because it gives better airflow around the turkey — and you need airflow for it to roast evenly.
- If your pan is way bigger than the turkey, the drippings will be spread out over a larger area. That'll make it easier for them to burn, so you'll have to keep a close eye on them.

## The Sides

The roasting pan needs to have sides that are high enough to contain all the drippings with no spills, but low enough to let air flow around the turkey.

- 3 inches is generally a good height for the sides.
- If you have a rack that lifts the turkey off the bottom of the pan, the sides can be a little higher.

## A Rack

Some roasting pans come with racks to place your turkey in. They're useful for a few reasons.

- By lifting the turkey off the bottom of the pan, you're letting air flow all around the turkey. That helps the turkey cook better and more evenly, and keeps the bottom from getting soggy.
- If you want to flip your turkey while it's roasting, a rack is a huge help. The turkey is a lot less likely to stick to a rack than to the bottom of the pan.
- Racks have disadvantages, too. If they're not really solid in the pan, they can make handling the turkey and pan tricky. And they can be a pain to clean, too.

## Handles

Really, they'll make your life much, much easier. It's so much easier to get a turkey out of the oven when the roasting pan has handles, and it's a lot less dangerous.

The pan you like really depends on you. I have a really nice stainless steel one with a neat rack. I absolutely love it. But I got that from my mom because she hated it, and went back to her old Graniteware that she's always used and loved.

So you never know what you'll like! Part of learning how to cook a turkey is figuring out which roasting pan works for you.

## Preparation And Seasoning

Before we go over how to cook a turkey, we need to go over a two little steps first: [preparation](#) and [seasoning](#).

### Preparation

Let's go over the preparation steps you need to know to know how to cook a turkey.

1. If your turkey is frozen, **you need to thaw it**, and you need to thaw it properly. For more details, check out our article on [how to thaw a turkey safely](#).
  - If you have a frozen pre-stuffed turkey, you should *never* thaw it. Just cook it from frozen according to the directions on the packaging.
2. Once your turkey is thawed, **remove the giblets and neck**. You can use them for turkey stock or gravy.
3. The next step is optional. If you don't already have an enhanced turkey, you can **brine the turkey**.
  - It's worth trying if you have the time. For more details, check out our [article on making turkey brine](#).
4. After letting the turkey brine, you can **season and stuff it**, but we'll go over that in the [next section](#).
5. And finally, you can **truss the turkey**.
  - Trussing means tying down the legs and wings so that they don't flop around. It helps the turkey cook more evenly so that the white and dark meat finish cooking at the same time.

And now let's move on to the next step of how to cook a turkey: seasoning.

### Seasoning

And now, an important part of learning how to cook a turkey, **seasoning**.

When it comes to turkey, I usually feel like **less is more**. Turkey is more flavorful than chicken, and doesn't really need as much seasoning to be delicious. But still, sometimes it's nice to have something a little different.

So what are the different ways to season a turkey?

- **Season the cavity.** Seasoning the cavity helps season the meat by releasing flavors inside the turkey.
  - If you're cooking stuffing inside the turkey, that'll help season the meat. And the turkey will flavor the stuffing, too!
  - If you're not stuffing the turkey, you can rub some herbs and spices on the inside, or add things like onions, celery, carrots, lemon wedges or orange wedges.
- **Season the skin.** It's the simplest way to season a turkey. Just sprinkle some spices like salt and pepper all over the turkey.
  - Unfortunately, the skin will prevent the seasonings from really penetrating the meat. You'll get tasty skin, but it won't really affect the flavor of the meat much.
- **Season under the skin.** This is my favorite way to season a turkey, but it does mean you have to handle the raw turkey a bit more.
  - Start on the breast side near the opening, and you should be able to lift the skin right up. You may need to cut a few membranes here and there.
  - Then, rub the herbs and spices directly on the meat. Without the skin keeping out the seasonings, they'll be able to flavor the meat a whole lot more.
- **Buttering the bird.** You can rub a little bit of softened butter over and under the skin.
  - The butter on the skin will help the turkey brown more evenly and more easily.
  - The butter under the skin will seep into the turkey and baste it. So you end up with a moist and juicy self-basting turkey.

As I said, turkey is pretty tasty all on its own, especially if you [brined it](#). Salt and pepper under the skin, and a bit of butter are really all you need. But you can use any seasonings you like if you want something a little bit different: garlic, rosemary, thyme, sage... it'll all be good.

And that's **how you season a turkey**. It's not hard, and you really don't need much. And now, let's learn how to cook a turkey.

## Cooking The Turkey

Alright, we're almost done, and we've reached the most important part: **how to cook a turkey**.

There are a lot of things to keep in mind when you're cooking turkey. Learning how to cook a turkey makes it easier to adjust your cooking to end up with the perfect turkey. So what's important when cooking a turkey?

- The water evaporating from the meat **intensifies the flavor**. But it also means less moisture in the turkey and drier meat. It's important to find a balance between too much and too little evaporation.
- Generally, people prefer a **nicely browned turkey** with crispy skin. The trick is to get it to brown nicely, but not to let it burn.
- The **drippings are really important**, too. They're the basis for an awesome gravy. As the drippings pool at the bottom of the roasting pan, they'll cook and become more flavorful. But you don't want them to cook so much that they burn.
- You want to be sure that **the turkey cooks evenly**. If the dark meat and white meat finish cooking at the same time, you won't end up overcooking or drying out either one.
- The turkey needs to **cook in a reasonable amount of time**.

In this section, we'll go over the different ways to make sure you control all those important factors, and then we'll go over how to cook a turkey in our easy turkey cooking instructions.

- [Choosing the Right Temperature](#)
- [To Cover or Not to Cover](#)
- [Using a Rack?](#)
- [Breast-Side Up Or Down?](#)
- [All About Basting](#)
- [Turkey Cooking Instructions](#)

## Choosing The Right Temperature

Learning how to cook a turkey means knowing **how hot to set your oven**. It helps you control how fast and evenly the turkey cooks, how crisp the skin gets, and what kind of drippings you get.

And the best temperature to set your oven is 325F, or 350F, but no hotter. Why?

- **325F is a great balance.** If you set the oven any cooler, it can take a really long time for the turkey to cook. But it's not so hot that the outside will burn and get dry before the inside is done.
- It's also **great for the drippings**. They'll cook and become more concentrated, but they're less likely to burn than if you set your oven to 400F.
- Sometimes, the **turkey doesn't quite brown** at 325F. If you're having that problem by the last hour or so of cooking, turn up the heat to 400F until the skin is as crisp as you like it.

## To Cover Or Not To Cover

A lot of roasting pans come with a lid so that you can completely cover the meat. But do you want to use this for turkey? Or do you want to use a foil tent to cover it? Or nothing at all?

Knowing when to use a lid is an important part of learning how to cook a turkey. So here's what happens when you cover turkey.

- When you **cover turkey with a lid**, you seal in all the steam and juices. Instead of roasting the turkey, you're steaming it.
  - Steaming helps keep the turkey moist, because there's not as much evaporation going on. Unfortunately, evaporation makes the turkey more flavorful, so you might end up with a blander turkey.
  - Steaming helps cook the turkey faster. If you're in a rush, you can cover the turkey for at least part of the time.
  - The turkey won't brown as easily if it's steamed instead of roasted.
  - Because it can't escape, the steam ends up in the drippings. The good news is you'll have more drippings and they won't burn. The

bad news is they'll be very diluted and won't be very flavorful.

- You can also **cover the turkey with foil**. A foil tent doesn't do the same thing as a lid at all, because it doesn't seal any of the steam in. You're still roasting the turkey.
  - The shininess of the foil tent helps reflect heat *away from* the turkey, which means it won't cook as quickly.
  - It's perfect if your turkey is browning too quickly for your taste. Just cover the part that's browning too quickly with a piece of foil, or if the whole thing is cooking too fast, cover it with a loose foil tent.

## Using a Rack?

Some roasting pans come with racks, and they can be a huge help when you're learning how to cook a turkey.

- Lifting the turkey off the pan helps **air flow** all around it. That helps it cook more evenly, which means you don't have parts that are overcooked and dry when others are just barely done.
- If you want to **flip the turkey**, a rack makes it a lot easier. If the turkey's directly on the pan, it could stick and tear when you flip it, but it won't stick much to a rack.
- If your roasting pan doesn't come with a rack, you can make your own by placing **a bunch of carrots and celery** underneath the turkey. It'll keep it off the bottom and let air flow.

The bad thing about using a rack is that it can **leave marks on the turkey**, where it was pressed up against the bars. It's especially noticeable if you cooked the turkey breast side down for a while.

In my family, we always carve the turkey before bringing it to the table, so it doesn't matter, but if you bring the turkey to the table whole, it might not look quite as good.

## Breast-Side Up Or Down?

The usual way to cook a turkey is to place it breast-side up in the roasting pan, and let it cook. But let me tell you how to cook a turkey a little differently: breast-side down.

- If you **cook the turkey breast side down**, all the juices will seep down to the breast meat, and that'll keep it moist and juicy.
- It does **prevent the breast side from browning**, so you need to flip it back breast-side up for the last third of the cooking time.
- You have to be careful. If you have a **very heavy turkey**, or one full of stuffing, flipping it might be a bad idea. It's very hot, so unless you're sure you can handle it, *don't*. Better safe than sorry.
- You might need a **V-shaped rack** if your turkey isn't stable breast-side down. The last thing you want is for it to wobble. That can be dangerous.

Learning how to cook a turkey breast-side down is a great trick for delicious, juicy turkey.

## All About Basting

Basting means pouring liquid over the meat while it's cooking. You can use the drippings and cooking juices, or just stock, water, juice or some other liquid. So is basting an important part of how to cook a turkey?

- The main goal of basting is to **keep the skin from burning**, and help it brown more evenly. If you see your turkey getting a little too brown, you may want to baste a bit.
- Basting **doesn't really do much to keep the meat moist** and juicy. Most of the juices run off to the bottom of the pan, and they don't penetrate very deeply into the meat.
- Opening the oven door to baste **makes the temperature fluctuate**, and that can make the turkey cook less evenly and more slowly. So if you do baste, do it once per hour, max.
- Instead of basting, you can **rub a bit of softened butter** under the turkey's skin. That'll make the turkey self-basting, keeping it moist without affecting the oven's temperature.

My advice for how to cook a turkey is to use the butter trick. Don't bother with basting unless the turkey is getting too brown.

## Turkey Cooking Instructions

Now that we know all the important things about how to cook a turkey, here are some step-by-step turkey cooking instructions.

1. **Preheat your oven to 325F.**
2. **Season the turkey lightly.** I recommend just a bit of butter on and under the skin.
3. (Optional) **Stuff the turkey.**
  - Stuffing usually expands as it cooks, so stuff the turkey loosely — maybe 1/2 a cup of stuffing per pound of turkey.
4. **Truss the turkey** — you can just tie the legs together, and tie the wings down to the body.
5. **Place the turkey in the roasting pan.**
  - Generally, you'll get better results if you let the turkey reach room temperature before putting it in the oven. Don't let it sit out for more than an hour, but try not to put it straight from the fridge to the oven.
  - If you want, you can place the turkey breast-side down for the first two thirds of the cooking time, and then flip it breast side up. It'll keep the breast meat moist. Just be sure that's it's stable, and that you can flip it safely while it's hot — it shouldn't be too heavy, or stuffed.
6. **Place the turkey in the oven**, uncovered, and let it cook.
  - If the whole turkey is browning too quickly, you can baste it, or cover it all with a loose foil tent.
  - If parts are browning too quickly, like the legs or breast, just cover those parts with a bit of foil.
  - If you're not getting enough drippings, or the drippings are burning, cover the turkey with a lid, or add a bit of liquid (stock or water) to the bottom of your roasting pan. Remove the lid after an hour or so.
  - Knowing how to cook a turkey means being able to watch for these signs and react to them. So keep an eye on that bird!
7. **Cook the turkey until it's done.** That means using a meat thermometer to tell when

- The thigh meat is at 180F, **and**
  - The breast meat is at 170F, **and**
  - The stuffing, if any, is at 165F.
  - The turkey's temperature will rise 5 to 10 degrees after you take it out of the oven. So you can actually take the turkey out when the meat is at 165F or so.
  - For an estimate of how long it'll take, check out our [turkey cooking time chart](#). But be sure to at least *check up* on the turkey 45 minutes before the chart says it's done, to avoid overcooking.
  - Some turkeys come with a pop-up indicator to let you know when it's done, but they usually pop up late. A meat thermometer is more accurate. But leave the indicator in, or you'll create a hole and lose lots of the juices, giving you a dry turkey.
8. **Remove the turkey from the oven.** Cover, and let stand 20-40 minutes before carving.
- Standing gives the juices time to redistribute. It makes the turkey easier to carve, and makes each turkey slice juicier.
9. **Carve, serve and enjoy!**

And that's how to cook a turkey that's perfectly moist and delicious. Enjoy!