

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR HOLIDAY LEFTOVERS

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INTRODUCTION

Your holiday meal was a success, but now you have food left over. Many Americans find it hard to know what to do with holiday leftovers, especially when it comes to reusing them in new recipes and knowing how long to keep them safely. If managed properly, leftovers from a holiday meal can be reused easily and quickly for budget-friendly and safe meals.

STORING LEFTOVERS SAFELY

When deciding which foods to keep as leftovers from a holiday meal, make sure they were not left out at room temperature for too long. Foods that stay between 40 and 140 F for more than two hours can grow bacteria, which can cause food-borne illnesses. If you think a food has been at room temperature too long, throw it away.

When in doubt, throw it out!

To cool food quickly, divide large amounts into shallow containers and store them in the refrigerator or freezer as soon as possible. Hot food can go directly into the refrigerator. Most refrigerated leftovers should be eaten within four days of the initial meal. Frozen items are usually safe for three to four months; however, while they may still be safe after that, their quality and flavor may decrease.

When freezing leftovers, label what the item is and when it was made. Store leftovers in airtight containers or packaging to reduce moisture. Also, avoid overcrowding your refrigerator, as it will struggle to keep temperatures below 40 F.

For leftover turkey, remove the meat from the bone and cut it into smaller pieces. Pre-cooked turkey can be frozen and used later in soups, casseroles or skillet meals.

The FoodKeeper app is available for free on both android and Apple devices and can help you quickly decide about the freshness of food and beverages. This app was developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service, Cornell University and the Food Marketing Institute. You can search for food products to see how long items can be stored while keeping their freshness and quality.

REHEATING LEFTOVERS SAFELY

When reheating leftovers, ensure they reach at least 165 F to kill any bacteria. You can reheat leftovers that are frozen, thawed or from the refrigerator. However, thaw frozen items safely by using the refrigerator, cold water or the microwave. Thawing in the refrigerator takes longer but is the safest method, as it keeps the food safe while it thaws. Never leave items out at room temperature for long periods. Covering food while reheating helps keep moisture in and makes it more flavorful.



MEAL PLANNING WITH LEFTOVERS IN MIND

Using leftovers in future meals can save money, be convenient and save time. Think about whether you will eat the leftovers within four days of the holiday meal. If not, consider freezing them. Small portions of frozen meat (without bones) can be quickly added to meals, sometimes without needing to defrost.



WAYS TO TURN HOLIDAY LEFTOVERS INTO NEW MEALS

• Sandwiches

- Sandwiches are a popular choice after holidays. Use whole wheat bread or tortillas with leftover meat, condiments and toppings like tomatoes, lettuce, peppers, carrots or cucumbers for a hearty sandwich.

- You can also use side dishes, such as stuffing, on a hot grilled sandwich with protein. Pair these hot sandwiches with a quick salad and fruit for a balanced meal.

• Soups and Chilis

- Add fresh or frozen leftover protein to soups or chilis. Shred or chop the meat before adding it to your favorite recipe.

- A simple recipe includes a bag of frozen mixed vegetables, two cups of rice, and three cans of low-sodium broth for a soup base. Add your protein and preferred spices to enhance flavor.

• Casserole

- Use leftover mashed potatoes as a topping for shepherd's pie. Add extra leftover vegetables to the bottom meat mixture.

- Combine leftover chopped protein with a grain and vegetable for a weeknight casserole.

• Salads

- Add chopped or shredded protein to side or entrée salads. Make it a full meal with a grain, a nut and fruit. A turkey chef salad with dried cranberries and pecans alongside whole grain bread is a good example.

- You also can mix protein into a cold pasta salad with veggies for a quick side dish.

• Breakfast

- Breakfast for dinner can be a fun family meal. Add leftover protein to scrambled eggs, omelets or an egg casserole.

- Use leftover bread to make French toast or a breakfast bread pudding for a sweet treat.

• Tex-Mex

- Mix leftover vegetables or protein into rice or beans for a taco rice bowl.

- Use leftover proteins in enchiladas, burritos or tacos for a quick meal.

• Skillet Meals

- Stir-fry and skillet meals are quick ways to cook a protein, vegetable and grain you have already cooked.

- Sauté leftover protein with at least one cup of vegetables and onions. Add sauces and serve over pasta or rice.

• Baked Potatoes

- Top baked potatoes with leftover protein, spices and condiments for an easy and delicious meal.

- Add a vegetable or salad to make it complete

After a holiday meal, many Americans struggle with managing leftovers. To store them safely, ensure food is not left out at room temperature for more than two hours and refrigerate or freeze them promptly in shallow containers. Reheating leftovers should involve reaching at least 165 F to eliminate bacteria. Creative meal ideas include sandwiches, soups, casseroles and breakfast dishes. Planning for leftovers can save time and money while providing delicious meals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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