

What's that growing in the refrigerator?!? A guide for storing and eating leftovers ^[1]

Dear Alice,

How long can meat such as Thanksgiving turkey be kept in the refrigerator and still be good to eat?

Leftover lover

Answer

Dear Leftover lover,

Enjoying holiday leftovers is a favorite tradition of many. However, food-borne illness resulting from eating leftovers long past their prime can dampen holiday cheer for anyone. Typical symptoms of food-borne illness caused by bacteria include abdominal pain, diarrhea, and vomiting.

There are two different families of bacteria found in food: pathogenic bacteria and spoilage bacteria.

- *Pathogenic bacteria* cause food-borne illness and form when food is left out at room temperature — about 72° Fahrenheit (F) or 22° Celsius (C) — for extended periods of time. These bacteria grow rapidly when in the "danger zone," which is between 40° to 140° F (4 to 60° C). They are difficult to detect, because they don't affect the taste, smell, or appearance of food. Safe food handling and proper food storage are your best methods of defense against pathogenic bacteria. Check out the [Partnership for Food Safety Education](#) ^[2] for detailed instructions on how to keep food safe for consumption.
- *Spoilage bacteria* can grow at lower temperatures, including temperatures typically found in refrigerators. These bacteria cause food to taste, look, and smell badly. Most of the time, spoilage bacteria won't cause illness, but they do make food much less appealing to eat.

Leftovers need to be kept in airtight containers, recommended for reuse and food storage, in the refrigerator or freezer. They can also be wrapped in two layers of plastic wrap or foil. Additionally, leftovers can be placed in a plastic storage bag (with the food inside wrapped in a layer of plastic

wrap or foil) to maintain moisture and prevent absorption of odors from other foods. When freezing extras from your delicious dishes, add freezer tape to help keep air and moisture out, and to prevent freezer burn. The ideal temperatures are 40°F (4°C) in the refrigerator and 0°F (-18°C) in the freezer when storing your grub.

So, how long will your turkey day eats last when stored? Here are some safe time limits for keeping these common meat and poultry leftovers tasty:

Chicken

- Cooked or fried chicken will last three to four days in the refrigerator and four months in the freezer.
- Chicken nuggets or patties will last one to two days in the refrigerator and one to three months in the freezer.

Meat

- Lunch meat (a.k.a. cold cuts) will last two weeks in the refrigerator if unopened, and three to five days after opening. In the freezer, you can expect lunch meat to last one to two months.
- Cooked meat and casseroles will last three to four days in the refrigerator and two to three months in the freezer.

Turkey

- Turkey cooked alone or in a dish will last three to four days in the refrigerator and four months in the freezer.
- Turkey gravy, the perfect companion, will last one to two days in the refrigerator and two to three months in the freezer.

As for the rest of your tasty vittles, visit the [U.S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) Food Safety and Inspection Service](#) ^[3] for more information on the safe keeping of most foods. Enjoy your holiday meal today, tomorrow, and even the next day!

Alice!

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