

How to Cook Chicken Without Drying It Out

If chicken breast keeps turning out dry, the answer is not a more complicated recipe. It is controlling thickness, heat and doneness so the chicken stops cooking at the right moment.

Chicken breast is simple once you stop guessing

Dry chicken usually comes from one thing: cooking too long. The easiest way to improve it is to make the pieces cook evenly and use temperature instead of intuition.

Make the thickness even

If one end of the breast is much thicker than the other, the thin end will be dry before the center is done. Gently pound the thickest part until the piece is more even, or slice very large breasts horizontally into thinner cutlets.

Season before cooking

Pat the chicken dry, then season both sides with salt, black pepper and any herbs or spices you like. A little oil helps the seasoning stick and promotes browning.

Use a properly heated pan

Heat a skillet over medium to medium-high heat, add a thin layer of oil and place the chicken in only when the pan is hot. You should hear a steady sizzle, not violent popping.

Leave it alone long enough to brown

Once the chicken is in the pan, give it time to develop color before moving it. Constantly shifting it around prevents browning and makes it harder to judge the cooking.

Flip and lower the heat if needed

Cook the second side until the center is nearly done. If the exterior is browning faster than the inside is cooking, reduce the heat rather than letting the outside burn.

Use a thermometer

An instant-read thermometer removes the guesswork. Insert it into the thickest part and remove the chicken as soon as it reads 165°F, the USDA safe minimum internal temperature for chicken. The key is to stop cooking promptly rather than giving it an extra five minutes “just to be safe.”

Rest before slicing

Move the chicken to a plate and let it rest for several minutes before cutting. This helps the juices settle instead of running onto the cutting board.

The beginner rule

Even thickness, hot pan, thermometer, rest. If you remember those four things, chicken breast becomes one of the easiest proteins to cook well instead of one of the easiest to ruin.

Jane’s Note

Pull the chicken as soon as the thickest part reads 165°F. Those extra few minutes “just to be safe” are what dry it out; the thermometer has already done the safety check.

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