

What Can I Make Ahead for Thanksgiving?

The goal is to leave fewer last-minute jobs, with enough refrigerator and oven space for everything.

One Week Before

Choose the menu and serving dishes. Check oven temperatures for each recipe and make a reheating plan. Freeze baked bread or rolls if your recipe allows. Buy a thermometer and shallow leftover containers.

Several Days Before

Begin thawing a frozen turkey in the refrigerator, allowing roughly 24 hours per 4-5 pounds. A 12-14 pound bird often needs around 3 days or more; start early enough to allow a margin. Keep on a tray at 40 F or colder. Cook within 1-2 days after thawing.

One To Two Days Before

Make cranberry sauce following its recipe and refrigerate promptly. Chop vegetables and refrigerate in covered containers. Dry bread cubes for stuffing; keep the dry bread separate from refrigerated cooked vegetables and other wet ingredients.

One Day Before

Make mashed potatoes and refrigerate promptly in shallow containers. Either fully bake stuffing and chill promptly, or keep its components separate until tomorrow. You can make a broth-based gravy base ahead, then add fresh turkey drippings on the day; adjust total liquid and salt accordingly.

Thanksgiving Day

Roast turkey using the time chart for planning and a thermometer for doneness. Finish gravy from drippings. Reheat cooked potatoes, stuffing, and other leftovers to 165 F. Use the turkey's resting time to finish sides. Keep hot dishes at 140 F or hotter and cold foods at 40 F or colder if holding.

After Dinner

Pack food into shallow containers and refrigerate within 2 hours of being out, or 1 hour above 90 F. Do not wait for a large pot to cool on the counter. Label with the original cooking date and use most cooked leftovers within 3-4 days, or freeze promptly. Reheating does not restart that clock.

Jane’s Note

Pick two or three dishes to finish early. You do not have to make the whole meal ahead to enjoy a calmer day.

Related guides: How to Cook a Turkey · How to Make Turkey Gravy From Drippings · How to Make Mashed Potatoes Ahead of Time · How to Make Stuffing · Safe Cooking Temperatures Chart · How Long Do Leftovers Last in the Fridge?

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