MU Extension provides holiday food safety tips for Thanksgiving

Due to COVID-19, many are choosing to celebrate Thanksgiving in smaller groups this year. That could mean a lot of people will be preparing a turkey and all the trimmings on their own for the first time.

“I remember the first time that I prepared a Thanksgiving dinner complete with turkey and all the side dishes by myself at my own house,” says Londa Nwadike, state extension food safety specialist with the University of Missouri and Kansas State University. “My mom and brothers were going to drive seven hours to Kansas City, so I felt like I better prepare them a proper Thanksgiving meal.”

Nwadike says she checked and double-checked her own articles about food safety, which draw on information from USDA and other research-based sources.

“Don’t stress over preparing a Thanksgiving meal,” Nwadike says. “But be sure to use safe practices and plan ahead so that no one gets foodborne illness at your holiday gathering.”

**TURKEY**

“If you want to have leftovers after Thanksgiving, buy 1 pound of whole turkey per person,” Nwadike says. A rule of thumb is raw turkey may have touched. As always, wash your hands thoroughly before and after preparing food. This can help to control COVID-19 as well as foodborne illness.

To cook the turkey, set the oven for 325 degrees. An 8- to 12-pound unstuffed turkey will take about 2 3/4 to three hours to cook. A stuffed turkey of the same size will take three to 3 1/2 hours, Nwadike says.

Use a food thermometer to determine if the turkey is safely cooked. Make sure the innermost parts of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast have reached a minimum temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit. Be sure the thermometer is not touching bone, as the bone heats up faster than the meat.

**TO STUFF OR NOT TO STUFF**

“Many people love to eat stuffing. Unfortunately, so do microorganisms,” Nwadike says. The safest way to cook stuffing is outside the bird. If you do choose to stuff your turkey, stuff it loosely just before cooking, making sure the stuffing is moist. Like the turkey, stuffing should be cooked to at least 165 degrees.