



Giblets and Food Safety

Giblets (pronounced JIBB-letz; also GIBB-letz) are the heart, liver and gizzard of poultry. The word comes from Middle English "gibelet," which in turn came from "gibier" — Old French for "game." The English altered the word to "giberet," and it formerly meant "a game stew." Today many cooks use giblets to make gravy; others broil or fry them to make appetizers or main dishes. Here is some background information about poultry giblets.

What Are Giblets?

Giblets are defined as the heart, liver, and gizzard of a poultry carcass. Although often packaged with them, the neck of the bird is not a giblet.

The *heart* is the muscular organ that pumps blood through the body of the bird.

The *liver* has numerous functions in digestion and absorption of foods. Its primary function in digestion and absorption is the production of bile. Bile facilitates the solubilization and absorption of dietary fats and the excretion of certain wastes.

The *gizzard* is the mechanical "stomach" of a bird. It is located just after the true or glandular stomach in the gastrointestinal system. Since poultry have no teeth and swallow feed whole, this muscular organ, sometimes called "hen's teeth," mechanically grinds and mixes the bird's feed.

How Are They Inspected?

All poultry found in retail stores is either inspected by USDA or by state systems which have standards equivalent to the federal government. At the time of slaughter each bird and its internal organs are inspected for signs of disease. The "Inspected for Wholesomeness by the U.S. Department of Agriculture" seal ensures that the bird and giblets are free from visible signs of disease.

In a poultry slaughter plant, giblets must be chilled to 40 °F or below within two hours of slaughtering the birds. Each hour, plant employees sample the finished poultry and giblets. The product is checked for conditions not meeting inspection standards, and proper trimming to make sure all inedible portions have been removed. Proper trimming refers to removal of the heart cap, removal of the gizzard lining, and removal of the gall bladder. USDA inspectors sample the product twice a shift to check for conditions that do not meet inspection standards. Anything that does not meet inspection standards is not used for human consumption.

Are Giblets Graded?

No, inspection is mandatory but grading is voluntary. *There are no grading standards for giblets.*

How Are Giblets Packaged and Labeled?

In whole ready to cook poultry, giblets are located in a bag in the abdominal cavity. *They will not be from the original bird.* Giblets may also be purchased separately as livers, hearts, or a combination thereof, and labeled accordingly.

Ready to cook whole poultry is required to be packaged with giblets and will not bear a product name qualifier to announce the presence of the giblets as they are expected. If a bird is labeled “with giblets,” it is optional labeling.

Whole poultry will contain at least half of each giblet. Parts of the giblets may have broken off during handling or may be missing due to trimming. Some are packed into the body cavity of the bird by hand and some are packed by machine.

USDA allows poultry processors to use labels stating that giblets may be missing — or, “without giblets” (commonly known as “wogs” in the poultry industry). Giblets may be lost or broken or may have been pulled from the processing line for not meeting inspection standards. Birds packed without giblets are required to bear labeling that states the giblets are missing. Likewise, the phrase “giblets may be missing” is a flag to alert the consumer that giblets may not be present.

What Color is Normal for Livers?

Normal poultry livers range in color from tan or yellow to deep mahogany red. A yellow liver indicates a fattier liver. The color variation depends on what the bird ate last and has nothing to do with the *age* or *health* of the bird.

Occasionally a liver may be a shade of *green*. Green livers are condemned at the slaughter plant and are rarely seen by consumers. The green coloring is due to bile leaching out from the gallbladder and into the liver. Bile is a yellow or greenish fluid secreted by the liver and stored in the gallbladder. Its function in the body is to aid in the emulsification and absorption of fats.

Green livers are not harmful if eaten but are removed and condemned in the slaughter plant for aesthetic reasons. Sometimes the gallbladder or a portion of it remains attached to the liver. It looks like a “green pill”. In the plant the gallbladders are removed by hand or machine and occasionally one is missed inadvertently. It can be removed in the home and the liver consumed with no problems. **It is safe to eat the meat of poultry regardless of the color of the liver it contains. Remember the giblets are not packaged with the original bird.**

Safe Handling of Giblets

Giblets packaged separately from poultry are kept cold during distribution to retail stores to prevent the growth of bacteria and to increase shelf life. Select fresh giblets just before checking out at the register at the store. They should feel cold to the touch. Place them in a disposable plastic bag (if available) to contain any leakage that could contaminate cooked foods or produce.

At home, immediately place giblets (or poultry containing giblets) in a refrigerator that maintains 40 °F or below, and use within 1 or 2 days; or freeze at 0 °F or below. If kept frozen continuously, they will be safe indefinitely. For best quality, use giblets within 3-4 months of freezing.

Safe Thawing of Giblets

There are three safe ways to thaw giblets and poultry containing them: in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave oven. Never thaw giblets on the kitchen counter.

REFRIGERATOR THAWING. It is best to plan ahead for slow, safe thawing in the refrigerator. As a rule of thumb, whole poultry with giblets will take about 24 hours for every 5 pounds of weight to thaw in the refrigerator. A 1-pound carton of frozen chicken livers will take about 24 hours. Raw poultry and/or giblets defrosted by this method, may be stored in the refrigerator 1 to 2 days. During this time, if giblets are not used, they can be safely refrozen.

COLD WATER THAWING. Leave the giblets or poultry containing them in the original airtight packaging or place in a leak-proof bag. Submerge the product in cold water and change the water every 30 minutes to make sure it stays cold. A whole 3 to 4 pound fryer with giblets should thaw in 2-3

hours by this method and a whole 15 pound turkey will take 7 to 8 hours, or approximately 30 minutes per pound. A 1-pound carton of chicken livers should thaw in 1 or 2 hours. Once thawed, cook immediately.

MICROWAVE THAWING. Cook giblets and poultry containing them immediately after microwave thawing because some areas of the food may become warm and begin to cook. Holding partially cooked food is not recommended because any bacteria that may have been present may not have been destroyed. Foods thawed in the microwave or by the cold water method should be cooked before refreezing.

Dating of Giblets

Product dating is not required by federal regulations, however many stores and processors voluntarily date packages of giblets and poultry with giblets. If a calendar date is shown, there must be a phrase explaining the meaning of the date. Consumers should use or freeze products with a "sell-by" date within 1 or 2 days of purchase. If the manufacturer has determined a "use-by" date, observe it. The use-by date is for quality assurance, after the date, peak quality begins to lessen but the product may still be used. It's always best to buy a product before its date expires. If a date expires after the giblets are frozen, they may still be used.

Safe Cooking of Giblets

Traditionally, chicken or turkey giblets are cooked by simmering in water for use in flavoring soups, gravies or poultry stuffing. Once cooked, the liver will become crumbly and the heart and gizzard will soften and become easy to chop. Cooked giblets should have a firm texture. Casseroles containing giblets should be cooked to 165 °F. Stuffing should also be cooked to 165 °F. Chicken giblets are commonly fried or broiled. Leftovers should be refrigerated within 2 hours.

Accidental Cooking in Packaging

Some giblets are *paper wrapped* before being inserted into the poultry body cavity. In this case, there would be **no concern** if the giblets are accidentally cooked inside the bird to a safe temperature.

If giblets were packed in a **plastic bag**, and the bag has been altered or melted by the cooking process, do not use the giblets or the poultry because harmful chemicals may have leached into the surrounding meat. If the plastic bag was not altered, the giblets and poultry should be safe to use as long as the meat is fully cooked.

Food Safety Questions?

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at **1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)**; TTY: 1-800-256-7072.



The Hotline is open year-round Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish). Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at www.fsis.usda.gov.

Send E-mail questions to MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov.

Ask Karen!

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7.



AskKaren.gov