

Carving Up Ham

Ham is the traditional centerpiece of many Easter dinners. The most difficult step in getting the ham on the table is deciding which to buy.

Ham is from the leg of a pig. The choices for ham include fresh, cook-before-eating, cooked, picnic, and country types. Ham is sold as bone-in or boneless, half or whole, unsliced or spiral sliced. Each type of ham has its own storage and cooking times.

Most hams you'll find made in the U. S. are city hams. They are wet-cured and made by soaking the meat in a saltwater solution or injecting it with a brine.

Hams are labeled in a few different ways. A "fresh" or uncooked ham is a raw ham that must be cooked before eating as it has not been cured or cooked. They will have a pale pink or beige color, like a pork roast. It will require the most cooking. "Cook-before-eating" refers to a ham that needs to be heated before serving since it has been cured. Pre-cooked hams are typically vacuum-sealed hams that have been smoked, baked, and/or cured. Cured ham or cured-and-smoked ham will have a deep rose or pink color. Country ham and prosciutto will have a pink to mahogany color. These can be eaten cold or heated.

Buy ham with the bone. As with any meat, the bone-in meat is more tender and succulent. A whole ham can serve 20 to 24 people with leftovers and is 12 to 14 pounds.

When buying a half ham, choose the shank end. It has the most flavor because there's a higher fat ratio, and it is significantly easier to carve, having only a single, straight bone. The butt end is rounded, while the shank end is the pointy end of the ham.

Buy cooked hams with no skin and no fat. No one will eat the skin, and there is a fat layer underneath; therefore, it is much healthier for us.

Buy cooked ham unsliced. Spiral-cut hams are popular because of their convenience. Many cooks say an uncut ham has better flavor and texture than a spiral cut. You usually get more slices out of a ham that has not already been sliced.

The estimated amount of ham per serving to buy is:

- Boneless Ham: 1/3 to 1/2 pound per serving
- Bone-In Ham: 1/2 to 3/4 pound per serving

It isn't necessary to wash raw pork before cooking it. Any bacteria that might be present on the surface would be destroyed by cooking.

You might want to enhance ham with a glaze, which is a topping spread over a ham prior to baking to enhance the flavor of the meat or after it has finished baking and to help keep it moist and tender in texture.

With all the variety of hams, it's best to follow packaging instructions for baking times. According to the USDA, fresh and cook-before-eating hams are done and safe to eat when they reach a minimum internal temperature of 145°F. Pre-cooked hams should reach an internal temperature of 140°F before serving. Set your oven to 325°F, no lower, and you're ready to cook.

Before carving, let baked ham rest for 15 minutes to redistribute juices.

Cut the ham off the bone and refrigerate it within 2 hours of it being cooked or heated. Leftovers will last for 4 days in the refrigerator, so if you know you won't use them right away, pack them into freezer bags or airtight containers and freeze.

Reheat cooked ham in the oven at 325°F to an internal temperature of 140°F as measured by a food thermometer.

For holidays or gatherings, serving a ham is always a crowd-pleaser. Knowing how to prepare a ham properly is invaluable knowledge for a home cook.