­­­A British guide to Thanksgiving

Turkey, American football and giant balloons - what is Thanksgiving really all about?

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**What is Thanksgiving?**

Thanksgiving is celebrated in the United States following the traditions of the first Pilgrims and Puritans at Plymouth (Massachusetts) who, legend has it, were thankful for a good harvest in 1621. Historically, Thanksgiving has its roots in harvest festivals and days of religious worship, and Canadians celebrate a separate Thanksgiving also drawing upon these origins a little earlier in the year. Today Thanksgiving has become a traditional time to get together with family or friends. The date is now regarded as a secular holiday to celebrate family.

**What is the big deal?**

On the surface, there seems very little to ‘get’ – a day off work, devoted to eating lots of food and hanging out with friends and family. It is a national holiday in the US, where many offices and businesses allow staff to have a four-day weekend.

**What do people do?**

Thanksgiving is a celebration in which large groups of friends and family come together, unlike Christmas, which tends to be for smaller family units. The attitude tends to be ‘the more, the merrier’, with Americans particularly worried about being ‘all alone’ on Thanksgiving.

Football – the American kind, not ‘soccer’ - plays a major role too. For football on Boxing Day in the UK read American football on Thanksgiving in the USA.

America is steeped in the fine tradition of gorging on televised sport, and there are three NFL games to tide over gridiron fans on Thursday. Twelve hours of live games kick off at 12.30pm eastern time, when the Green Bay Packers travel to Detroit to take on the Lions without their star quarterback Aaron Rodgers. Four hours later it's the Oakland Raiders at the Dallas Cowboys, followed by the pick of the day's games in Baltimore, where last year's Super Bowl-winning Ravens face the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Fortunately the generous ad breaks in every match mean viewers will still have ample time to consume several imperial tons of turkey and pumpkin pie.

The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade also keeps many Americans glued to their screens - if they aren't [braving this year's windy conditions on the New York streets](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/10478990/Thanksgiving-2013-Macys-parade-balloons-could-be-grounded.html).

**When is it celebrated?**

On the fourth Thursday in November.

**What food is eaten over the period?**

Turkeys have little to be thankful for on this day - eating turkey is actually more associated with Thanksgiving than it is Christmas in the States. That said, the [President does traditionally ‘pardon’ one turkey each year](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/10479439/Barack-Obama-pardons-Thanksgiving-turkey-at-White-House.html).

The same goes for cranberry sauce, brussels sprouts, and pecan pie. For Christmas here, many families sit down to what us Brits would regard a proper Sunday roast – beef and Yorkshire puddings, or pork, rather than turkey or goose.