

# Food Preparation

## Creative Ways to Use Leftovers



Instead of tossing out leftover food, save time and money by safely reusing leftovers.

### Food Safety

It is essential to refrigerate and freeze food properly once it has been cooked. Refrigerate leftover hot and cold foods within 2 hours. Bacteria multiplies in the “temperature danger zone” between the temperatures of 40 F and 140 F. Place hot leftovers in shallow pans, no more than 4 inches deep, and refrigerate to allow for quick cooling.

### Storing Leftovers

- Store cooked leftovers in the refrigerator and eat them **within 3 to 4 days**.
- Place leftovers in **clear, airtight containers** to easily see what is in them.
- Use a removable label or tape a sticky note to the container to **label the item** with the day the food is prepared.
- **Move food that will spoil** first to the front of the refrigerator as a reminder to eat it soon.

### Freezing Cooked Leftovers

- Freeze cooked leftovers within 3 to 4 days.
- Place food in an **airtight container** made of plastic or glass. Remove as much air as possible before closing.
- **Label the container** with the product name, the current date, and recommended storage time. In general, freeze casseroles for 2 to 4 months and soups and stews for 2 to 3 months.
- Learn more: [go.illinois.edu/WhatCanIFreeze](http://go.illinois.edu/WhatCanIFreeze)

### Thawing Methods

Never thaw foods outside or in a garage, basement, or out on the kitchen counter. These methods can leave your foods unsafe to eat.

#### Thaw using one of four safe methods:

1. Thaw in the refrigerator.
2. Thaw food in a leak-proof plastic bag immersed in cold water and change water every 30 minutes.
3. Thaw in the microwave and cook it immediately after thawing.
4. Thaw during the cooking process, such as frozen hamburger patties on the grill.

### Reheating Leftovers

- Use microwave-safe containers for reheating leftovers in the microwave.
- Do not use plastic storage bags, brown paper bags, plastic grocery bags, newspapers, aluminum foil, or plastic containers.
- Reheat all food to 165 F as measured with a food thermometer.
- Never reheat foods in a slow cooker; instead, reheat on stove top or microwave and transfer to a slow cooker to keep warm (140 F or above).

### Get Creative

Find inventive ways to reuse and transform leftovers into new recipes to avoid eating the same thing night after night. Ask yourself if the food item can be turned into a stir-fry, soup, quesadilla, or casserole.

Find creative suggestions for using certain types of leftover foods on the next page.



Type of Food	Leftover Ideas
<b>Ham</b>	Cut leftovers into cubes and add to scrambled eggs, potatoes, pasta salads, lettuce salads, or rice dishes.
<b>Taco Meat</b>	Add to chili, top baked potatoes, or make homemade nachos.
<b>Beef or Pork Roast</b>	Add to vegetable beef stew, use in beef and noodles, or make barbeque sandwiches.
<b>Chicken</b>	Use in soups like chicken noodle or tortilla, make tacos or fajitas, add to salads, wraps, pasta dishes, quesadillas, and dips.
<b>Steak</b>	Use for steak and eggs, in a quesadilla, or as a salad topper.
<b>Fish</b>	Use for fish tacos or fish cakes. Mix with sour cream and chives for a fish dip. Make a fish chowder with leftover vegetables.
<b>Rice</b>	Make rice pudding or fried rice. Add leftover rice to vegetable soup or chicken broth.
<b>Pasta</b>	Add leftover pasta to soups, pasta salad, or stir-fry.
<b>Bread</b>	Make croutons, French toast, or breadcrumbs.
<b>Grapes and Berries</b>	Wash and freeze, add to yogurt, smoothies, or ice cream.
<b>Apples</b>	Sauté sliced apples with margarine and cinnamon for a dessert. Use older apples for baking into a pie, cobbler, or muffins.
<b>Overripe Fruit</b>	Add overripe fruit like pineapple or banana to smoothies.
<b>Vegetables</b>	Pickle extra vegetables using pickle juice or apple cider vinegar. Add leftover cooked vegetables to soups or stir-fries.
<b>Coffee or Iced Tea</b>	Freeze extra coffee or iced tea in ice cube trays and add to cold drinks.

## References

- [Storing and Reheating Leftovers](#), University of Minnesota Extension
- [4 Steps to Food Safety](#), FoodSafety.gov

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