

Kitchen and Food Safety

Easy Steps to Freezing Foods



Freezing is one of the easiest ways to store food for extended periods.

Basic Steps for Freezing

Freeze food within a few days, ensuring that potentially hazardous food, such as raw meat or cooked food, is never left at room temperature for more than 2 hours.

Use freezer packaging that is safe for the freezer. Use smaller containers, no more than 4 inches deep, to maintain quality and prevent ice crystals from forming.

Ensure airflow by allowing space around the container when placing it in the freezer.

Check your freezer temperature and maintain the freezer temperature at 0 degrees Fahrenheit or less to freeze the food rapidly.

Important Steps for Freezing Produce

Wash and drain produce before removing cores, pits, seeds, skins, etc. Wash small amounts at a time through several changes of cold water. Do not let the produce soak.

For fruits, determine how to prevent discoloration, if needed, and select your packing type. Most fruits have a better texture and flavor if packed in sugar or syrup. For more information, see [Freezing Food: Fruit](#).

Follow appropriate blanching times for vegetables; cool quickly by plunging them into ice water, then drain them. Blanching is to scald vegetables in boiling water or steam for a short time. Determine if you are doing a dry or tray pack. For more information, see [Freezing Food: Vegetables](#).

Pack in freezer containers, leaving sufficient space between the top of the packed food and the closure of the container.

Label the container with the product name and the current date and freeze at 0 F or below for 8-12 months for best quality.

Common Questions for Freezing Food

Can I freeze milk? Yes. Place into smaller airtight containers and leave an inch at the top to allow it to expand. Use within three months for best quality.

Can I freeze eggs? Eggs can be stored in the refrigerator for at least one month. To store longer, crack eggs and mix the yolks with the whites. To prevent graininess, add 1 tablespoon of sugar or ½ teaspoon salt per one cup of egg mixture. Strain through a colander to improve uniformity. Allow an inch at the top of the container. Do not freeze eggs in the shell.

Can I freeze cheese? Yes, you can freeze hard and semi-hard cheeses. For best results, shred cheese or slice it into small pieces before freezing. Cheese food products like sauces, dips, and processed cheeses usually freeze fine. Soft cheeses do not freeze well.

Can I freeze bread? Yes. For commercial packaged or homemade bread, place it in a heavy-duty freezer bag and freeze it for up to 3 months for best quality.

Selecting Freezer Containers

Place food in airtight containers made of plastic or glass, such as plastic freezer containers with tight-fitting lids or wide-mouth canning jars. Do not use regular glass jars; they break easily at freezer temperatures.

Another option is to use plastic freezer bags and moisture-vapor-resistant wrapping materials, such as plastic freezer wrap, freezer paper, and heavy-duty aluminum foil, which are suitable for dry-packed foods with little or no liquid. Press to remove as much air as possible before closing.

Before placing it in the freezer, label the wrapping or the airtight container with the product name, the current date, and the recommended storage time.

Thawing Foods Safely

Thaw using one of the four safe methods:

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

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

Once food is thawed in the refrigerator, it is safe to refreeze it without cooking. However, the quality may suffer due to moisture loss when thawing. After cooking raw foods which were previously frozen, it is safe to freeze the cooked foods.

Call Your Local Office

Contact your local Illinois Extension office with your food safety questions: go.illinois.edu/FindILExtension.

References

- [Food Freezing Guide](#), North Dakota State University.
- [Freezing and Food Safety](#), USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service.

Freezing at the Right Time

If you know you won't use raw meats within a few days, put it in the freezer as soon as possible to keep it from spoiling.

- Ground meat within 1-2 days
- Poultry (whole or pieces) within 1-2 days
- Roasts, steaks, or chops within 3-5 days
- Fish within 3-4 days
- Cooked leftovers within 3-4 days

Making Smart Choices

Many foods freeze well, some do not.

- High-water content vegetables, such as lettuce, celery, cucumbers, and radishes, break down when frozen.
- Potatoes may darken and change texture when included in soups and stews.
- When frozen alone and not as an ingredient within a dish, half-and-half, sour cream, mayonnaise, and cottage cheese often become grainy or watery.
- When frozen alone, cooked pasta loses texture.
- Gelatin and gelatin dishes weep when thawed.
- Cooked egg whites become tough and rubbery.

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