



Focus on

Food Safety

Food and Dairy Division

Frozen Foods: Clean Out That Freezer!

Frozen foods provide a convenient way for us to buy perishable foods in bulk, preserve foods at the peak of their freshness, and make sure we always have a ready supply of the foods we love on hand. But, before you stock up on frozen goodies, take some time to clean out your freezer and review safe food handling recommendations for frozen foods.

Frozen Facts

Freezing is a great way to preserve food for extended periods of time because it prevents the growth of micro-organisms that cause both food spoilage and foodborne illness. Freezing doesn't destroy these micro-organisms, though; it just slows the movement of molecules, causing microbes to enter a dormant stage. That's why it is especially important to make sure the food you place in your freezer is wholesome and not past its expiration date.

When food is stored constantly at 0°F it will remain safe indefinitely, although the quality will suffer when foods are frozen for a long time. Once thawed, microbes that were present when the food was frozen, including bacteria and molds, can become active again. If conditions are right, these microbes can multiply and lead to foodborne illness.

Clean Out That Freezer!

Cleaning the freezer needs to be done quickly to assure frozen foods you will be keeping stay frozen. First, take a quick inventory of what you have in that frozen cave. You may want to take items out of the freezer over several days, developing meal plans for the week to use up foods from the freezer. You can also use a cooler to slow down the thawing process.

Examine the packages, comparing the dates you froze the items to the freezing recommendation chart (see link on Page 2). If items appear freezer burned or unappetizing, or if the packaging is ripped or damaged, you may need to throw the foods away.

Wipe any spills or food crumbs with a warm, soapy cloth. A mild food grade detergent or bleach solution can be used. Once the freezer has been cleaned, replace the frozen foods in the freezer, placing the most recently frozen foods in the rear or bottom. You may also want to designate sections in your freezer for certain types of foods (e.g., meats, fruits, etc.). This will help you more easily locate items and may help prevent cross-contamination as items are freezing.

Safe Thawing

As you are cleaning out the refrigerator, make sure to thaw the foods you plan to consume in a safe manner. Since micro-organisms will grow at the same rate on thawed foods as on fresh food, you need to be careful to handle thawed items as you would any perishable food.

There are three safe ways to thaw food: in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave. It's best to plan ahead for slow, safe thawing in the refrigerator. For faster thawing, place food in a leak-proof plastic bag and immerse it in cold water. If the bag leaks, bacteria from the air or surrounding environment could be introduced into the food. Change the water every 30 minutes to make sure it stays cold.

After thawing, cook food immediately. This is especially important when food is thawed in the microwave, since some areas of the food can get warm and begin to cook. Cook thawed foods, regardless of thawing method, thoroughly.

Safe Handling Before Freezing

Now that you've cleaned out your freezer, there's room to add new foods! Food that comes out of your freezer is only as safe as the food you put into your freezer. To make sure your frozen foods start out safe and stay safe, follow these simple safe food handling rules as you prepare foods for freezing:

- Purchase foods before the "sell-by" or expiration dates.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with hot, soapy water before, during and after handling food products; and when you switch from handling one type of food product to another.
- Follow handling recommendations on products.
- If freezing meat and poultry in its original package longer than two months, overwrap the packages with airtight heavy-duty foil, plastic wrap, or freezer paper, or place the package inside a plastic bag.
- Always use the "first in, first out" rule.

Preparing for the Deep Freeze

Proper packaging helps maintain quality and prevent freezer burn. As you prepare foods for freezing, make sure to label items with the date and a description of the food product.

Make sure food can freeze rapidly by using several smaller containers or packages instead of one large one. Ideally, a food two inches thick should freeze completely in about two hours. Never stack packages to be frozen; instead, spread them out in one layer on various shelves, then stack them after they have frozen solid.

What to do When Freezer Temperatures Are Not Maintained

During a power outage, if the freezer fails, or if the freezer door has been unintentionally left open, thawing of foods in the freezer can occur. The food may still be safe to eat if ice crystals remain. If the freezer door was left open for a short time, and the food was kept cold (below 41°F), the food should stay safe.

If the power is off, keep the freezer door shut. A freezer full of food will usually keep for about two days (a half-full freezer about a day) if the door is kept shut. If the power will be off indefinitely, you may want to add dry ice, block ice or bags of ice in the freezer or transfer the foods to another freezer. Use an appliance thermometer to monitor the temperature.

To determine the safety of foods when the power goes on, check the condition and temperature of the foods. If the food still has ice crystals or is as cold as if it were in a refrigerator (41°F), it is safe to refreeze or use. Discard foods that have been warmer than 41°F for more than two hours. Discard any foods that have been contaminated by raw meat juices.

More Frozen Facts and Freezer Storage Recommendations

For more information, including freezer storage guidelines from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety Inspection Service, visit: www.fsis.usda.gov/factsheets/focus_on_freezing.