

Freezing Main Dishes

Timesavers in meal preparation are blessings to busy homemakers. And sometimes freezing a main dish can save time.

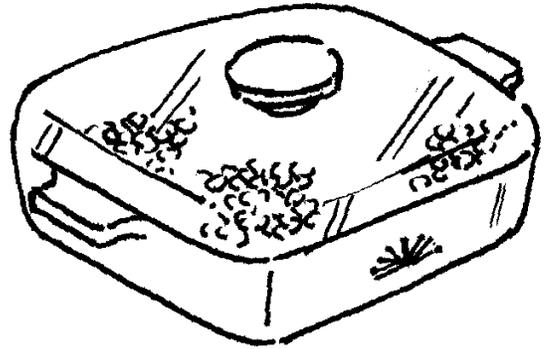
The home freezer was designed for freezing fresh meats, vegetables, and fruits. But if there is extra space in your freezer, it's nice to have frozen cooked foods when you have limited time to prepare a meal. However, with some foods it is easier and quicker to start from the beginning than it is to thaw out a frozen dish and reheat.

Checking Your Recipe

No special recipes are needed to prepare main dishes for freezing. Use your favorite one or a standard recipe. To determine if your family likes a main dish frozen, freeze a small quantity and let them try it.

Several foods, however, need special consideration:

- Hard-cooked egg whites are tough unless mashed through a sieve. Yolks can be diced or sieved.
- Cubed baking-type potatoes tend to crumble; add these when reheating. Mashed and restuffed baked potatoes freeze nicely.
- When using a spice, be sure it has not lost its characteristic flavor, color, and aroma.
- Before storing cooked food, remove as much fat as possible. Fat can give an off-flavor if stored too long.
- Cooked turkey sometimes becomes rancid after 2 months. Chicken has a slightly longer storage life.
- Freeze stuffing (dressing), cooked or uncooked, separate from the bird.
- Fried meats and fish lose their crispness when frozen. However, some people do not object.
- Meat loaf can be partly cooked or uncooked before freezing.
- Cover any meat with sauces or gravy to prevent drying out (freezer burn). Remove all fat.
- Completely cooked and deboned turkey, chicken, ham, roast, etc., do not dry out as easily when left in large pieces as when sliced or cut



into small pieces before freezing. Some homemakers prefer to cut meats into small pieces or slices before freezing. If this is done, package pieces to remove as much air as possible and use them within 6 weeks.

- Some gravies, creams, or white sauces separate when frozen but generally become uniform with slow reheating and continuous stirring.

Preparing Main Dishes

Most main dishes can be cooked to about three-fourths done before freezing. Reheating just before serving will complete the cooking. This gives a better product in flavor, texture, and aroma. Many foods that are cooked completely before freezing may taste overcooked or warmed over when reheated. Reheat foods that are completely cooked before freezing for just as *short a time as possible* (till bubbly hot) to keep their good flavor, color, and texture.

Quickly cooling precooked food that is to be frozen is very important to stop the cooking process and to help retain the characteristic flavor, color, and texture. It also slows down some bacterial growth that may cause spoilage. Transfer hot food to another container. Put it in a larger pan of ice and cold water until the food cools. Package, label, and freeze it immediately after cooling.

Packaging

For frozen foods to be their best, they must be packaged in moisture-vapor-proof freezer material and sealed tightly. Use freezer tape for sealing

foods wrapped in freezer paper. Remove as much air as possible from the package. When arranging a casserole in layers, press each layer down firmly to remove air. Label the package with the recipe name, date, number of servings, oven temperature needed for reheating, and the length of time to reheat.

You can freeze food in a casserole dish or the pan in which it is to be reheated. Package the dish in moisture-vapor-proof freezer material; then seal, label, and put it in the freezer. When ready to reheat, unwrap the dish and let it thaw in the refrigerator.

Another way to freeze cooked food is to line a casserole dish with aluminum foil and then put the food in the dish. After freezing, remove the food from the dish, wrap it in moisture-vapor-proof freezer material. Seal, label, and return it to the freezer. When ready to use, remove the freezer material and foil and return the food to the casserole dish. Let it thaw in the refrigerator before heating it in the oven.

A flat, shallow casserole will defrost and heat faster than a deep one.

Freezing and Storing

Freeze main dishes in the coldest part of the freezer. Leave space around the package so it will freeze quickly. Slow freezing breaks down food texture. Freezing takes from 12 to 24 hours. The temperature in the basket should be zero degrees or lower.

After freezing, store frozen packages as close together as possible. Use most frozen main dishes within 2 to 3 months.

Thawing and Reheating

After taking frozen main dishes from the freezer, *let them thaw in the refrigerator*. This prevents spoiling. Partly cooked or completely cooked

food spoils rapidly because it breaks down during the first heating period. If put in the oven without thawing, food will get hot on the edges but the center will still be frozen.

Never thaw prepared foods by running hot water over them. Tap water, however, is safe to speed up defrosting if the container is not breakable and is moisture proof. Generally, it's best to let cooked food thaw until only a few ice crystals remain and then reheat.

Follow directions that are given with the recipe for reheating. Some foods can be reheated in the oven and others on the surface unit, depending on the type of food. *Heat food only long enough to finish the cooking process. Prolonged heating will give a warmed-over flavor.*

NEVER REFREEZE THAWED COOKED FOOD

Points to Remember When Freezing Cooked Foods

- Cook main dish to about three-fourths done.
- Cool food quickly after cooking.
- Package in moisture-vapor-proof freezer containers.
- Remove all air.
- Seal packages, label, and date. You may include number of servings, oven temperature, and length of time to reheat.
- Freeze in the coldest part of the freezer.
- Store at zero degrees or below.
- Do not keep food stored longer than 2 or 3 months.
- Thaw cooked food in the refrigerator until only a few ice crystals remain.
- Reheat main dishes only long enough to finish the cooking time. If completely cooked, reheat only till bubbly hot.



Your Experts for Life

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For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

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