

Better-Safe-Than-Sorry Food Storage Charts

► How long can you keep luncheon meats in the refrigerator, leftovers in the freezer, flour in the cupboard? You'll find the answers to all your questions from the United States Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service.

Safe Food Handling

Take some simple precautions when preparing food for storage. Always work with well-scrubbed hands and be sure all utensils, cutting boards, etc., are absolutely clean. Then keep food either hot (above 135°F) or cold (below 41°F), never in between for any length of time. Here's why: There are common bacteria present all around us that are normally not troublemakers but can become dangerous if they are given the ideal "breeding" climate, between 70°F and 125°F, in which they quickly multiply to dangerous levels and can cause food poisoning. Don't leave foods in this "danger zone" for more than 2 hours.

Foods That Need Special Care

Take extra precautions with foods that are especially susceptible to bacterial growth—poultry, fish and seafood, meat, creamed mixtures, puddings, and stuffings. Some safe-handling tips:

- Never stuff poultry the night before you roast it—the stuffing may not heat to a temperature high enough to kill any harmful bacterial growth.
- When refrigerating leftover poultry and stuffing, remove the stuffing from the bird and store in separate dishes.

To Refreeze or not to Refreeze

You can safely refreeze virtually any partially thawed food as long as it still has ice crystals and has been held no longer than 1 or 2 days at refrigerator temperatures. Many foods, however—ice cream and uncooked baked goods, for example—will deteriorate in texture and taste.

Meat, fish, and poultry you've thawed in the refrigerator can be refrozen within 24 hours of defrosting. But combination dishes—pies, stews, casseroles, etc.—that have been thawed should not be refrozen.

With the exception of fruit and juice concentrates, foods thawed accidentally in the freezer over a period of days (because of power failure) should not be refrozen unless they still have ice crystals. If food is completely thawed (on purpose or by accident), warmed to room temperature, and left for more than 2 hours, throw it out. (The exception: fruit and juice concentrates that ferment when spoiled, thus preventing the growth of harmful bacteria.) Discard any fruit whose flavor is "off."

Differences in Package Dating

More and more foods are being sold now with a date that tells you something about their freshness. But just what does it tell you? That depends on the kind of food. Here, the most frequently used dates and what they mean:

- Fresh meat and fish are dated with "date of pack or manufacture," which refers to when the food was packed or processed for sale. (See Refrigerator chart, page 3, for storage life.)
- Dairy and fresh bakery products are labeled with a "freshness, pull, or sell-by" date, which refers to the last day the food should be sold. The date allows you a reasonable length of time to use the food.
- Frozen foods, fried snack foods, cereals, canned foods, macaroni, rice, and other foods are labeled with a "use before" or "best-if-used-by" date, after which the food is no longer at its best but can be used safely.
- Yeast and unbaked breads are labeled with an "expiration" or "use by" date, after which the quality of the food deteriorates. However, the food would still be safe to consume.

Pantry

Store foods in your coolest kitchen cabinets, not over range or near refrigerator's exhaust. Dry foods keep fresh the longest in airtight containers, which also keep out insects. When shopping, choose fresh-looking packages; avoid cans with swollen ends, dents. Date your purchases; then check your kitchen cabinets every 6 months or so to be sure you use the oldest items first. With longer storage, flavors gradually fade and nutrients can be lost.

Staples		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Baking powder, soda	18 months	Keep all dry foods in original package or tightly closed airtight containers in dry spot unless otherwise directed on label.
Bouillon cubes, powder	1 year	
Bread, rolls	3 days	
Bread crumbs, dried	6 months	
Cereals, ready-to-eat	Check date on package.	
ready-to-cook	6 months	
Chocolate, premelted	1 year	
semisweet	2 years	
unsweetened	18 months	
Coffee, vacuum pack	1 year	
Coffee, instant (closed)	6 months	Keep 2 weeks after opening.
Coffee lighteners, dry (opened)	6 months	Refrigerate after opening.
Condensed and evaporated milk	1 year	
Flour cake, all-purpose	1 year	Keep refrigerated.
rye, whole-wheat		
Gelatin, unflavored	3 years	
Honey, jams, syrups	1 year	
Molasses	2 years	
Nonfat dry milk	6 months	
Oil, salad	3 months	Refrigerate after opening.
Pasta	2 years	
Peanut Butter	6 months	Keep 2 months after opening.
Potatoes, instant	18 months	

Staples		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Rice brown, wild	1 year	
white	2 years	
Salad dressings	3 months	Refrigerate after opening.
Shortening, solid	8 months	
Sugar brown, confectioners'	4 months	
granulated	2 years	
Tea, bags, loose	18 months	
Tea, instant	2 years	

Packaged Foods and Mixes		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Cakes, prepared	2 days	
Cake mixes	1 year	
Casserole mixes	18 months	
Cookies, packaged	4 months	
Crackers	3 months	
Frosting, can or mix	8 months	
Hot-roll mix	18 months	
Pancake mix	6 months	
Piecrust mix	6 months	
Pies and pastries	3 days	Refrigerate cream, custard, chiffon fillings.
Pudding mixes	1 year	
Rice mixes	6 months	
Sauce, gravy, soup mixes	6 months	
Toaster pop-ups	3 months	

Canned and Dried Foods		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Fruits, canned	1 year	
dried	6 months	
Gravies, canned	1 year	
Meat, fish, poultry	1 year	
Pickles, olives	1 year	
Soups, canned	1 year	
dried	15 months	
Vegetables, canned	1 year	
Whipped-topping mix	1 year	

Herbs, Spices, Condiments		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Barbeque sauce, ketchup, chili sauce (opened)	1 month	
Herbs and spices		Keep in cool spot. Replace if aroma fades. Refrigerate red spices.
whole spices	1 year	
ground spices, herbs	6 months	
Hot pepper sauce, Worcestershire	2 years	

Miscellany		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Coconut, can	1 year	
Metered-calorie products, instant breakfasts	6 months	
Nuts	9 months	
Parmesan cheese, grated	1 month	
Pasteurized processed cheese food and spreads	3 months	
Soft drinks	3 months	
Vegetables onions, potatoes, rutabagas, squash (hard-shelled), sweet potatoes	1 week at room temperature	For longer storage keep at 50 to 60°F. Keep dry, out of sun, loosely wrapped.

Refrigerator

Keep refrigerator temperature between 34°F and 40°F. If it rises above 40°F, food quickly spoils. Except as noted in chart, wrap foods in foil, plastic wraps, or bags or place in airtight containers to keep food from drying out and odors from being transferred from one food to another. Food kept longer than recommended times may be usable but of inferior quality.

Dairy and Eggs		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Butter	1-3 months	Hold only 2-day supply in butter keeper.
Buttermilk, sour cream, yogurt	2 weeks	
Cheese		Keep all cheese tightly packaged in moisture resistant wrap.
cottage, ricotta	5 days	
cream, Neufchatel	2 weeks	
hard and wax-coated cheeses—Cheddar, Edam, Gouda, Swiss, etc., large pieces,		
unopened	3-6 months	
opened	3-4 weeks	
sliced	2 weeks	
Parmesan, grated	12 months	
process (opened)	3-4 weeks	Unopened process cheese need not be refrigerated.
spreads	2 weeks	
Cream—light, heavy, half-and-half	1 week	Keep tightly covered.
Dips—sourcream, etc.		
commercial	2 weeks	Keep tightly covered.
homemade	2 days	Keep tightly covered.
Eggs		
in shell	1 month	Keep small end of egg down, to center yolks.

Dairy and Eggs (cont.)		
Food	Time	Special Handling
yolks	2-4 weeks	Cover yolks with water; cover container.
whites	2-4 weeks	
Margarine	1 month	One week for best flavor.
Milk		Keep containers tightly closed. Do not return unused milk to original container. This spreads bacteria back to remaining milk.
evaporated (opened)	1 week	
filled, imitation pasteurized, reliquefied nonfat	3-4 days	
dry, skimmed	1 week	
sweetened condensed	1 week	
Whipped topping, in can	3 months	
prepared from mix	3 days	

Fruit		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Apples	1 month	Do not wash before storing—moisture encourages spoilage. Store in crisper or moisture-resistant bags or wrap. Keep fruit juices tightly covered. It is not necessary to remove canned fruit from can.
Apricots, avocados, bananas, melons, nectarines, peaches, pears	5 days	
Berries, cherries	3 days	
Citrus fruit	2 weeks	
Grapes, plums	5 days	
Pineapple	2 days	

Vegetables		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Asparagus	3 days	
Beets, carrots, parsnips radishes, turnips	2 weeks	Remove any leafy tops before refrigerating.
Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, green onions, zucchini	5 days	
Cabbage, cauliflower, celery, cucumbers eggplant, green beans, peppers, tomatoes	1 week	If necessary, ripen tomatoes at room temperature away from light before refrigerating.
Corn	1 day	Leave in husk.
Lettuce, spinach, all leafy greens	5 days	Rinse, drain before refrigerating.
Limas, peas	5 days	Leave in shell.

Meats		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Beef, lamb, pork, veal		If not prepacked, wrap loosely in waxed paper so surface can dry slightly.
chops	3-5 days	
ground meat	1-2 days	
roasts	3-5 days	
steaks	3-5 days	
stew meat	1-2 days	
Variety meats (liver, heart, etc.)	1-2 days	
Processed meats*		Store in coldest part of refrigerator. Unopened vacuum packs keep about 2 weeks.
bacon, frankfurters	1 week	
hams (whole, halves)	1 week	
hams, canned (unopened)	6 months	
luncheon meat, slices	5 days	
sausage, fresh or smoked	2-3 days	

*Treat uncured or nitrite-free meats like fresh; refrigerate only 4 to 7 days.

Fish and Shellfish		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Fresh, cleaned fish steaks, fillets	1 day	Keep wrapped in plastic wrap, bag.
Clams, crab, lobster in shell	2 days	
Seafood—shucked clams, oysters, scallops, shrimp	1 day	Cook only live shellfish.

Poultry		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Ready-to-cook chicken, duck, or turkey	2 days	May be stored in transparent wrap as purchased.

Canned Food, After Opening		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Baby food	2-3 days	Store all canned foods tightly covered. It is not necessary to remove food from can.
Fish, seafood; poultry	1 day	
Fruit	1 week	Store baby food covered. Don't feed baby from jar; saliva may liquefy food.
Gravy, broths	2 days	
Meats	2 days	Store all canned foods tightly covered. It is not necessary to remove food from can.
Pickles, olives	1 month	
Sauce, tomato based	5 days	Store all canned foods tightly covered. It is not necessary to remove food from can.
Vegetables	3 days	

Freezer

Keep freezer at 0°F, maximum 5°F. Check temperature with thermometer or use this rule of thumb: If the freezer can't keep ice cream brick-solid, temperature is above recommended level. If this is the case, use food within a week or two. To wrap for storage of 1 month or more, use moisture-vapor-resistant plastic wrap, freezer wrap (may be specially coated or laminated), or heavy-duty foil. After times listed, food is safe, but flavors fade.

Home-Frozen Foods		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Breads		
baked	3 months	Use only special freezer-dough recipes.
unbaked doughs	1 month	
Butter, margarine	9 months	Creamed cottage cheese and cream cheese don't freeze well. Cut and wrap in small pieces.
Cakes, baked	3 months	
Cookies, baked, dough	3 months	Creamed cottage cheese and cream cheese don't freeze well. Cut and wrap in small pieces.
Cheese		
dry-curd cottage		Creamed cottage cheese and cream cheese don't freeze well. Cut and wrap in small pieces.
cheese, ricotta	1 week	
natural, hard	6 months	Thawed cream may not whip.
cheese		
Cream (all kinds)	2 months	Thawed cream may not whip.
whipped		
Eggs, in shell		Do not freeze.
Egg white, yolks	1 year	For sweet dishes: Mix each cup yolks with 1 tablespoon corn syrup or sugar. For other cooking, substitute 1 teaspoon salt for sugar.

Home-Frozen Foods (cont.)		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Fish, shellfish		For all fish and shellfish: Wrap tightly in heavy-duty foil or freezer wrap.
“fatty” fish bluefish, catfish, trout, etc.	3 months	
“lean” fish cod flounder, etc.	6 months	
shellfish	3 months	
Ice cream, sherbet	1 month	
Main dishes, cooked		Freeze in freezer- and oven-proof baking dishes or freezer containers.
meat, fish	3 months	
poultry	6 months	
Meat		If meat is purchased fresh and wrapped in plastic wrap, check for holes. If none, freeze in this wrap up to 2 weeks. For longer storage, overwrap tightly with freezer or heavy-duty foil. Keep frankfurters in vacuum packages.
bacon	1 month	
frankfurters	1-2 months	
ground, stew meat	3 months	
ham	2 months	
leftover cooked	3 months	
roasts		
beef, lamb	1 year	
pork, veal	8 months	
steaks, chops		
beef	1 year	
lamb, veal	9 months	
pork	9 months	
variety meats	4 months	
Nuts	3 months	
Pies		
custard (homemade)		Do not freeze.
fruit	8 months	Freeze baked or unbaked.
Poultry		Wrap in heavy- duty foil or freezer wrap as airtight as possible. Thaw uncooked poultry in refrigerator or under cool running water. Cook within 2 days of thawing.
cooked, with gravy	6 months	
cooked, no gravy	1 month	
uncooked (whole)		
chicken, turkey	1 year	
duck, goose	6 months	
uncooked, (parts)		
chicken	9 months	
turkey	9 months	
Vegetables		1 year

Commercially Frozen Foods		
Food	Time	Special Handling
Breads		Pick up frozen foods immediately before going to checkout counter. Buy only foods frozen solid and with no dribbles on the package, odor, or other signs of being thawed. Put all frozen foods together in one bag so they'll stay as cold as possible for trip home. Store in original wrapping. Place in home freezer as soon as possible. Cook or thaw as label directs.
baked	3 months	
unbaked	Check label.	
Cakes		
angel-food	2 months	
layer cake, frosted	4 months	
pound, yellow cake	6 months	
Coffee lighteners	1 year	
Doughnuts, pastries	3 months	
Fish		
“fatty” fish— mackerel		
trout, etc.	3 months	
“lean” fish—cod		
flounder, etc.	6 months	
Shellfish		
Alaska King crab	10 months	
breaded, cooked	3 months	
lobster, scallops	3 months	
shrimp (unbreaded)	1 year	
Fruit	1 year	
Ice cream, sherbet	1 month	
Juices, concentrates	1 year	
Main dishes, pies,		
fish, meat	3 months	
poultry	6 months	
Meat		
beef, roasts, steaks	1 year	
ground	4 months	
lamb veal		

Commercially Frozen Foods (cont.)

Food	Time	Special Handling
roasts, streaks	9 months	
pork		
chops	4 months	
roasts	8 months	
Pancake, waffle batter	3 months	
Pies	8 months	
Poultry		
chicken, turkey parts	6 months	
chicken, turkey (whole bird)	1 year	
duck, goose	6 months	
turkey rolls, roasts	6 months	
Frozen dinners	6 months	
Vegetables	8 months	



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