

# Consumer Food Safety Checklist For “Planned-over” Foods



*Alice Henneman, MS, RD, Extension Educator  
and  
Joyce Jensen, REHS, CFSP  
Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department*



Making extra food to serve another day is a great time-saver IF food is handled SAFELY — and in a way to assure the BEST TASTE. Follow these tips to transform languishing leftovers into promising planned-overs.

to escape and protects from accidental contamination from other foods during cooling.

products, cooked rice, pasta and vegetables sit at room temperature longer than TWO hours TOTAL — the TOTAL is the total of the first and second use.

- ✓ Avoid letting perishable cooked foods, such as meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, dairy

## Cooling

- ✓ Separate and refrigerate the portion to be served for your next meal BEFORE you put the food on the table. This keeps food quality higher by preventing “planned-overs” from becoming “picked-overs.” It also helps keep food safe.
- ✓ Refrigerate planned-overs in shallow containers so they cool faster in the refrigerator. It’s not necessary for a food to be completely cool before it’s refrigerated. To help food cool slightly before refrigeration, place a shallow container of food on a cooling rack to allow air to circulate all around the pan for about 20 to 30 minutes.
- ✓ Limit depth of food to 2 inches. LOOSELY cover food upon refrigeration. This allows heat

## Keep Your Cool

Keep an appliance thermometer in your refrigerator and in your freezer to assure they stay at 40°F or lower (refrigerator) and 0°F or lower (freezer). Buy a thermometer at a discount, hardware, grocery store or other store that sells kitchen cooking tools. Periodically, place an instant-read thermometer in your refrigerator and in your freezer to check the accuracy of your appliance thermometer. Replace an inaccurate appliance thermometer if it cannot be calibrated.

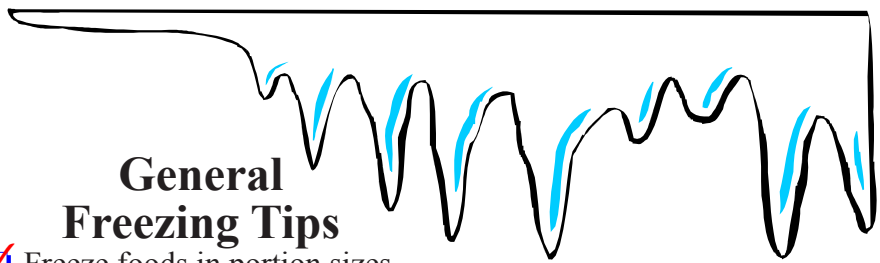


Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension’s educational programs abide with the nondiscrimination policies of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.

- ✓ A refrigerator temperature of 40°F or lower will slow bacterial growth. Keep your freezer at 0°F or lower. Freezing will stop most bacterial growth so frozen foods keep longer than those at refrigerator temperature. Freezing DOES NOT kill bacteria — it is still important to handle food safely.

**As a general rule, use the refrigerated planned-overs within 3 to 4 days for best safety and quality. Freeze for longer storage. Cool foods in the refrigerator before putting them in your freezer.**



## General Freezing Tips

- ✓ Freeze foods in portion sizes you'll need for future meals. For example, if there are two in your family and you each eat a cup of rice for a meal, freeze in two-cup portions.
- ✓ To hasten thawing when freezing foods: freeze in a thinner, flattened shape in freezer bags or freezer foil. A rounded shape takes longer to thaw through to the middle. Flatter packages also will stack better in your freezer.
- ✓ Remember to cool foods to refrigerator temperature before putting them in your freezer.
- ✓ Pack foods fairly tightly into containers or press out excess air when packing food in bags. For most foods, it's helpful to leave a little space (about 1/2 inch) between the food and the freezer container closure to allow for expansion of the food as it freezes.

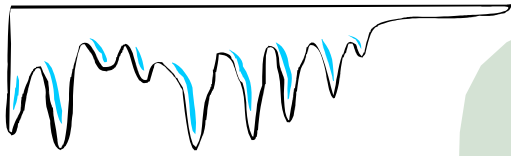
## Common Foods Generally Cited as NOT Freezing Well

- Cooked eggs.
- Cooked “chunks” of potatoes (mashed and twice-baked may freeze satisfactorily).
- Custards and cream puddings, by themselves or in pies.
- Potato salad.
- Pasta.
- Raw, watery vegetables such as lettuce, cucumbers and radishes; tomatoes, celery and cabbage might be satisfactory frozen as an ingredient in an already cooked dish such as a soup or casserole.
- Yogurt and sour cream.
- Mayonnaise may separate during freezing and thawing.
- Sauces and gravies thickened with flour or cornstarch may separate and break down when frozen.
- Fried foods may lose their crispness.
- Crumb toppings, such as on casseroles, may become soggy after freezing.

Sometimes you will see these foods in commercially frozen products because food companies have equipment that freezes food faster and helps retain quality better. Also, various ingredients, generally unavailable to home cooks, are used commercially to help prevent frozen foods from breaking down.

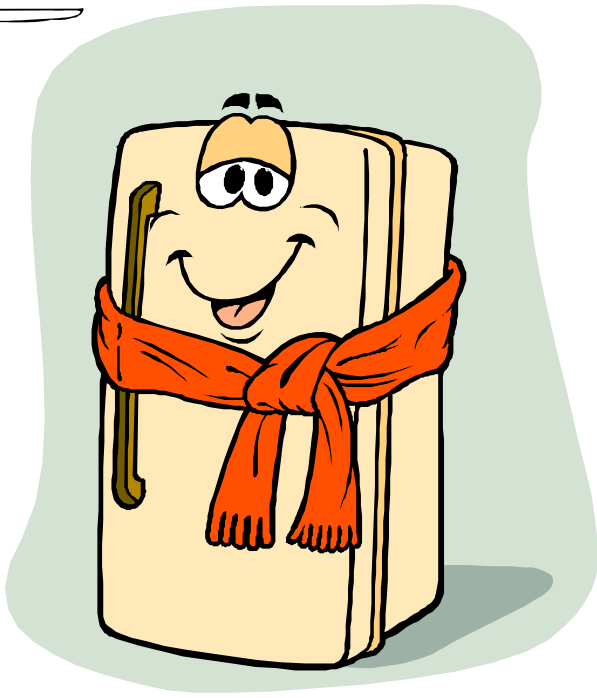
Before you double a recipe for frozen “planned-overs,” experiment by freezing a small amount the next time you make the recipe. If you're satisfied with the results, prepare extra food for freezing when you make the recipe again.

As a general rule, foods with a high water content, such as the vegetables in our list, do not freeze well. The water in food expands during freezing and breaks down the food's structure, making the food mushy when thawed. This is why frozen fruit packages often advise eating the fruit while still slightly frozen.



- ✓ While frozen food remains safe indefinitely at 0°F, the quality deteriorates the longer it's stored.

Check storage times of specific foods using the Food Marketing Institute's (FMI) "Food Keeper" at <http://www.fmi.org/consumer/foodkeeper/brochure.cfm>



the paper is placed next to the food. Unless directed otherwise, the plastic-coated side goes next to food. Secure freezer paper with freezer tape.

### Freezer Containers

- ✓ Rigid freezer containers include metal, foil, plastic, glass and ceramic containers identified by the manufacturer as suitable for freezing. CAUTION: Carefully read manufacturer's directions about safe handling when

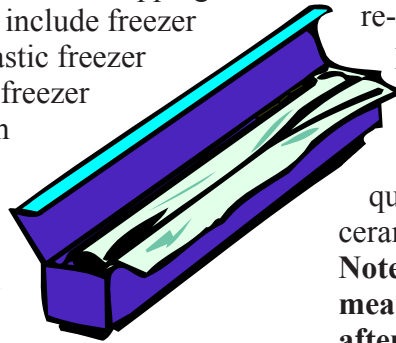
using glass or ceramic dishes labeled freezer/microwave/oven safe.

- ✓ "Freezer burn," when the surface of the food appears light-colored and dried out, occurs when moisture on the surface evaporates. Proper cooling, air removal, moisture-vapor-resistant packaging, a tight seal and an appropriate length of storage help prevent freezer burn. While a food with freezer burn is safe to eat, the quality is lower.

## Packaging Food for the Freezer

### Freezing Wrapping Materials

- ✓ Suitable freezer wrapping materials include freezer paper, plastic freezer bags and freezer aluminum foil.
- ✓ Check wrapping labels for specific



- ✓ Foil and metal pans work well for freezing foods you'll re-heat in the oven. Cover pan tightly with freezer-quality foil or place in a plastic freezer bag. Metal/foil pans cool quicker and heat faster than ceramic or glass containers. **Note: foil containers aren't meant to be reused; discard after using.**

- ✓ Label each package with the type and amount of contents and the date it was frozen. Use the dates to assure products are eaten while the quality is still good.

information about whether the wrappings work for freezing. For example, not all plastic bags are designed for freezer use. It's important to use materials intended for freezing as they're more likely to keep moisture out and less likely to tear in the freezer.

- ✓ Consider freezer/microwave safe-containers for foods you'll reheat in the microwave.

- ✓ If you're freezing several packages at once, leave a little space between them so air can circulate freely and they freeze faster. Move them closer together when they're frozen.

- ✓ Choose a container that fits the amount of food you're freezing.

- ✓ For freezer paper, check directions for which side of

- ✓ Some containers aren't suitable for freezing. For example, milk and cottage cheese cartons aren't moisture-vapor-resistant enough for freezing.

## Safe Thawing

### Caution

DO NOT thaw perishable foods at room temperature. Just ONE bacterium, doubling every 20 minutes, could grow to 64 bacteria in two hours and 2,097,152 bacteria in seven hours!

If perishable foods, such as meat, are left at room temperature too long, bacteria may grow and produce heat-resistant toxins that can cause food-borne illness. Cooking may not be able to destroy these toxins.

- ✓ It's best to plan ahead for slow, safe thawing in the refrigerator. Small items may thaw overnight in the refrigerator. Larger foods may take longer — allow approximately one day for each 5 pounds of weight.
- ✓ Thaw packages of raw meat, poultry or seafood on plates on lower shelves of refrigerators to prevent their juices from dripping on other foods.
- ✓ For faster thawing, place food in a leakproof plastic bag and immerse bag in COLD water. Change the water every 30 minutes to assure it stays cold. DO NOT use hot water. After thawing, refrigerate the food until ready to use. Food thaws in cold water at the rate of approximately a pound per half hour.



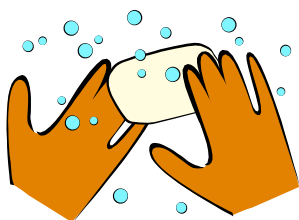
- ✓ If food is thawed in the microwave, cook it right away. Unlike food thawed in a refrigerator, microwave-thawed foods reach temperatures that encourage bacterial growth. Cook immediately to kill any bacteria that may have developed and to prevent further bacterial growth.

If thawing in a plastic freezer bag in the microwave, follow manufacturer's directions for such things as venting, recommended heat settings, types of foods suitable for microwave-thawing, etc. for that specific bag.

Follow microwave manufacturer's directions for your specific microwave.

### Serving Planned-overs

- ✓ When reheating planned-overs, heat until steamy hot throughout (165°F).
- ✓ ENJOY!



### Important

Always wash your hands with soap and warm water for about 20 seconds before and after handling food. Avoid touching food with your hands if you have a cut or open sore.