Do you feel like you’re in a holidaZE during the holidays? A simple quick-cooking technique is to make extra food at one meal for future meals. Or, to prepare food ahead and freeze for a later time. This can free up valuable time for you when cooking for family and friends over the holidays.

One easy method of freezing foods — including liquid foods such as soups and stews — is to freeze them in freezer bags. Following are some general freezing tips, followed by specific tips for freezing in freezer bags.

• If you’re making extra food at one meal for future meals, separate and refrigerate the portion to be served later 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.

• 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).

• Refrigerate perishable foods so the TOTAL time they’re at room temperature is less than two hours (or one hour in temperatures above 90°F). At room temperature, just ONE bacterium in perishable foods could grow to 2,097,152 bacteria in seven hours! As a general guideline, eat perishable foods within four days or freeze them.

Perishable foods include:

- meat, poultry, fish, eggs, tofu
- dairy products
- pasta, rice, cooked vegetables
- fresh, peeled and/or cut fruits and vegetables

• 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.

• Limit depth of food to 2 inches.

Step 1. Cool Foods

“slightly” at room temperature before refrigeration

It is not necessary for a food to be completely cool before it is refrigerated. To help food cool slightly before refrigeration:

- Place a shallow container of food on a cooling rack to allow air to circulate all round the pan for about 20 to 30 minutes.

Step 2. Complete cooling of foods in the refrigerator

Cool foods to refrigerator temperature before bagging them for your freezer. It is OK to refrigerate foods while they’re still warm.

LOOSELY cover food upon refrigeration. This allows heat to escape and protects the food from accidental contamination from other foods during cooling.

Step 3. Pack foods into freezer bags

Use “freezer” bags, not “storage” bags for storing food in the freezer. Freezer bags are thicker than storage bags and will keep the food fresh longer. Speed freezing and hasten thawing by freezing foods in a thin, flattened shape in freezer bags. A rounded shape takes longer to thaw through to the middle. Flatter packages also will stack better in your freezer.

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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. Up to 5 pounds of food should thaw in
about 24 hours.

If there is the possibility a thawing package might leak, you may want to
thaw it on a plate or a pan.

If food is thawed in the microwave, finish reheating 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.

• Food may be transferred from a freezer bag to a microwave safe container for
  thawing in the microwave.
• If the freezer bag manufacturer says it is OK to thaw foods directly in their
  freezer bag, follow manufacturer’s directions for such things as venting,
  recommended heat settings, types of foods suitable for microwave-thawing,
  etc. for the specific bag. Also, follow manufacturer’s directions for your
  microwave.
• While you may be able to satisfactorily defrost food in some freezer bags in
  the microwave (check manufacturer’s directions), DO NOT cook the food
  in the freezer bag — unless recom-
  mended by the freezer bag manufac-
  turer. At the higher temperatures used
  in the microwave cooking process, it is
  possible for the plastic to reach melting
  temperatures.

**Step 4. Label foods**

To avoid mystery meats and other foods of unknown age and possibly
origin, label foods using freezer tape, gummed freezer labels or permanent
marking pens/crayons. Include:
• name of food;
• packaging date;
• number of servings or amount;
• additional helpful information, such
  as form of food (sliced, chopped, etc.),
  any special ingredients.

**Step 5. Put in freezer**

It is helpful to place filled freezer bags on a flat surface in your freezer,
such as a metal pan. Do not stack freezer bags until frozen so they will freeze
faster. After they are frozen solid, the bags may be removed from the pan and
stored, stacked, directly on the freezer shelf. Or turn them on their edge and
store them vertically. This is an especially good idea when freezing liquid foods,
such as soups and stews.

**Step 6. Thaw and cook frozen foods**

DO NOT thaw perishable foods at room temperature. If perishable
foods are left at room temperature too

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**SLOW COOKER LENTIL SOUP**

(6 servings)

- 6 cups water
- 1/4 cup parsley (chopped fresh, or 2 tablespoons dried parsley), optional
- 2 teaspoons beef bouillon (or 2 cubes beef bouillon)
- 1-1/2 cups lentils (dry)
- 2 carrots (medium, sliced)
- 1 onion (medium, chopped)
- 2 celery stalks (sliced)

Mix all ingredients together in slow cooker. Cook on LOW for 8–10 hours or HIGH for 4–5 hours. Serve hot with crackers or bread.

whatscooking.fns.usda.gov/recipes/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/slow-cooker-lentil-soup*

*ALICE’S TIPS:*
- I omitted adding the parsley to the soup while it was cooking. Rather, I added fresh parsley as garnish when serving the soup.
- For added flavor, I added 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme and 2 finely chopped garlic cloves along with the other ingredients.
- I used a 4-quart slow cooker to cook the soup.
- To lower the sodium level of this soup, use low or reduced sodium beef bouillon cubes or powder. Or, substitute 2 cups of low sodium broth for 2 of the cups of water.
- Unlike dry beans, dry lentils do not need to be soaked before they are cooked.

*This is a peer reviewed publication*

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