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Mailing Perishable Foods

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Download date	2024-11-10 03:02:22
Link to Item	https://dc.statelibrary.sc.gov/handle/10827/50488

Mailing Perishable Foods

Everyone loves getting packages in the mail. Sometimes they are gifts of food, either homemade or from mail order. When it is baked goods or shelf-stable canned items, the lucky recipient usually knows how to tell about its safety and what to do with it. What about smoked turkeys, cheese and sausage gift packs, and other perishable items? Whether you are giving or receiving, there are some food safety tips you need to keep in mind for these special gifts.

Tips for the Purchaser

Speedy Delivery: Ask the company how the food will be mailed. If it is a perishable item, it should be delivered as quickly as possible, ideally overnight. Make sure perishable items and the outer package are labeled "Keep Refrigerated" to alert the recipient.

Storage & Preparation Instructions: Will the food item come with storage and preparation instructions? Some mail order food gift items are of an unusual nature and some consumers may not know how to handle or prepare them.

Arrange a Delivery Date: Tell the recipient if the company has promised a delivery date. Or alert the recipient that "the gift is in the mail" so that they or a neighbor can be home to receive it. Otherwise it may sit unsafely on the front porch or at the post office for hours or even days. Do not have perishable items delivered to an office unless you know it will arrive on a work day and there is refrigerator space available for keeping it cold.

Tips for the Receiver

Check the Temperature: When you receive a food item marked "Keep Refrigerated," open it immediately and check its temperature. The food should arrive frozen or partially frozen with ice

crystals still visible, or at least, refrigerator cold to the touch. Even if a product is smoked, cured, and/or fully cooked, if it says "Keep Refrigerated", it is a perishable product and must be kept cold. If perishable food arrives warm - above 40 °F as measured with a food thermometer - notify the company. Do not consume the food. Do not even taste suspect food. Remember that it is the shipper's responsibility to deliver perishable foods on time and the customer's responsibility to have someone at home to receive the package.

Keep it Cold: Refrigerate or freeze perishable items immediately. Even if a product is partially defrosted it is safe to freeze it, although there may be a slight loss of quality.

Tips for the Mail-It-Yourself-er

Foods That Are Not Recommended: The National Center for Home Food Preservation lists the following foods as being unsafe for canning and NOT recommended as gifts:

- Herbs or vegetables in oil or oil infusions. Flavored vinegars properly prepared are safe. See [HGIC 3470, Flavored Vinegars](#).
- "Canned" breads or cakes such as "Cake-in-a-Jar." Instead package dry cake, bread or cookie recipe ingredients and provide mixing and baking instructions.
- Homemade chocolate or fudge sauces. Safe, tested recipes are not available for home processing of these low-acid sauces that contain dairy products.
- Pumpkin butter. There are no safe, tested recipes.
- Foods canned in decorative, untested jars. Only use recommended jars and lids.
- Any canned food that does not have a tested recipe for processing. Use only safe, tested recipe from a reliable research-based source.

Recommended Foods: Foods that do not need to be refrigerated and are good choices for mailing include hard salami, hard cheese, country ham, cookies, brownies, fruitcake and fudge. Make sure perishable foods are not held at temperatures between 40 and 140 °F, the "Danger Zone", for longer than two hours. Bacteria that cause foodborne illnesses can grow rapidly in the "Danger Zone," but they may not affect the taste, smell or appearance of a food, so that it may not be apparent that the food is unsafe to eat.

Pack it Safely: Perishable foods will stay at a safe temperature longest if frozen solid first. When it is frozen, pack your food gift with a cold source such as frozen gel packs or purchased dry ice. When using dry ice:

- Don't touch the dry ice with bare hands.
- Don't let it come in direct contact with food.
- Write "Contains Dry Ice" on the outside of the box to warn the recipient.

Use a Sturdy Box: Pack your frozen food and cold source in a sturdy box, such as heavy foam or corrugated cardboard. Fill up any empty space with crushed paper or foam "popcorn". Air space in the box will cause the food and cold source to thaw faster. See Figure 1 for an example of a safe way to ship perishable foods.

"MINIATURE DEEP-FREEZE" PACKAGING

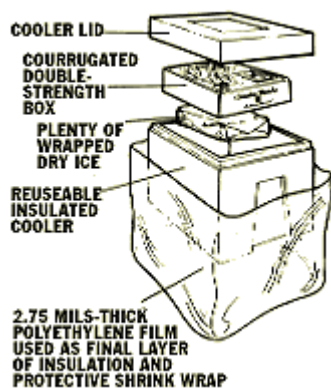


Figure 1. "Miniature Deep-Freeze" Packaging. (Reprinted from *Food News for Consumers*, Holidays 1988.)

Label it Perishable: If the item is perishable, your package should be clearly labeled "Perishable - Keep Refrigerated." As in "Tips for the Purchaser," above, arrange a delivery date with the recipient. Ship your package by overnight delivery.

Label your homemade food gifts with the following helpful information:

- The creation date
- The ingredients -helpful information for those with food allergies
- Storage and handling information

Mail Foods Early in the Week: Do not send food packages at the end of the week so that they do not sit in the post office or mailing facility over the weekend.

For information on mailing food packages to members in the U.S. military overseas, see [HGIC 3612, Mailing Food Gifts to Military](#).

Sources:

1. National Center for Home Food Preservation. (July 2003.) *Resources for Home Food Preservation Gifts*. http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/tips/winter/hfp_gifts.html
2. USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. (September 2006.) *Mail Order Food Safety*. http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Mail_Order_Food_Safety/index.asp#chart

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by P.H. Schmutz, HGIC Food Safety Specialist, and E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University. (New 01/99. Revised 11/07.)

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