

## Safety of Stored Foods

The most frequently asked questions on food safety are about food storage. How long is it safe to store leftovers in the refrigerator? Is it safe to eat that meat found in the back of the freezer? How long is too long to store home-canned jars of vegetables?

### Cold Food Storage

The best way to ensure that cold foods are kept safely is to purchase two refrigerator/freezer thermometers. Keep one in the refrigerator and one in the freezer. This way you can make sure that you maintain foods at safe temperatures: 40 °F or lower in the refrigerator, and 0 °F or lower in the freezer. Foods in the refrigerator will begin to freeze at 32 °F, so ideal refrigerator temperatures are between 32 and 40 °F. Refrigerator/freezer thermometers will also help in case of a power outage, because temperature is what determines whether a food is still safe to keep. Once you have your refrigerator and freezer at proper temperatures, then all you will need is information on how long different foods will keep. Of course, if a food looks or smells spoiled, the old adage "If in doubt, throw it out!" still applies.

### Refrigerator Storage

The following foods will keep only 1 to 2 days in the refrigerator:

- fresh (raw) ground meats and stew meats
- gravy and meat broth
- fresh poultry and fresh fish
- shrimp, scallops, crayfish, squid
- shucked clams, mussels and oysters

These foods will keep 3 to 4 days in the refrigerator:

- fully cooked ham slices
- cooked meat and meat casseroles
- cooked chicken and chicken casseroles

- pizza
- cooked fish and cooked shellfish

The following will keep 3 to 5 days in the refrigerator:

- opened packages of luncheon meats or deli-meats
- fully cooked ham portions
- fresh meat steaks, chops and roasts

The following foods have longer refrigerator storage times as indicated:

- fresh eggs in shell -- 3 to 5 weeks
- hard-cooked eggs -- 1 week
- commercial mayonnaise after opening – 2 months
- hard cheese (such as cheddar, Swiss), opened -- 3 to 4 weeks
- soft cheese (such as brie, feta), cottage cheese, ricotta, milk -- 1 week
- yogurt -- 7 to 14 days.

### Freezer Storage

Foods will keep safely in the freezer if stored at temperatures of 0 °F or below. However, for best quality follow these guidelines:

- Use moisture-proof, freezer-weight wrap (such as bags and containers specifically intended for use in the freezer, heavy duty foil and freezer paper).
- Label and date all packages with a permanent marker.
- Practice the First-In, First-Out rule.

Follow these recommended times for storage in the freezer to enjoy the best quality in flavor and texture and to maintain good nutritive value.

**1 to 2 months:** ice cream, sausage, ham, hotdogs

**2 to 3 months:** cooked leftover meat, gravy, and meat broth; fresh, fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel, tuna

**3 to 4 months:** fresh giblets, fresh (raw) ground meat or stew, shucked shellfish

**4 to 6 months:** cooked poultry; fresh, lean fish such as cod, flounder, trout

**6 to 12 months :** fresh beef, poultry, venison, hard cheese, fruits and vegetables.

## Canned Food Storage

Store home-canned foods that have been properly processed using up-to-date, approved methods, for up to one year. Commercially canned high-acid foods such as juices, tomatoes, fruits, pickles and sauerkraut will store well for 12 to 18 months. Commercially canned low-acid foods such as meat products and vegetables will store well for 2 to 5 years. Storage does not improve the quality of any food, but the quality of a food will not decrease significantly if stored properly and if the food is eaten within the recommended time frame.

Follow these recommendations for purchasing and storing canned goods to maintain best quality:

- Buy cans and jars that look perfect. Cans and jars should be free of dents, cracks or bulging lids, which may indicate a serious food poisoning threat. Dusty cans or torn labels may indicate old stock.
- Practice the rule, **FIRST IN, FIRST OUT**. This means you use the oldest products first. Place the newly purchased cans in back of the same products already on the shelf. For best quality, use home-canned foods within one year, and commercially-processed cans within two years.
- Storage cabinets should be cool and dry. The best temperature for storing canned foods is between 50 and 70 °F. Avoid storing canned foods in a warm place near hot pipes, a range or furnace, or in direct sunlight. Storage time decreases significantly when temperatures are above 75 °F. Keep canned

goods dry to prevent cans or metal lids from rusting, which may cause cans to leak and food to spoil.

- Commercially canned foods can be safely eaten straight from the can as long as the container is intact. However, **DO NOT** use home-canned vegetables unless you have the means to boil them for 10 minutes before eating.
- Don't taste or use canned foods that show any signs of spoilage! Look closely at all cans before opening them. A bulging lid or leaking can is a sign of spoilage. When you open the can, look for other signs such as spurting liquid, an off odor or mold. Spoiled canned foods should be discarded so they will not be eaten by humans or pets.
- Remember that once a can is opened, it becomes perishable; and, if you are not going to eat it right away, it should be refrigerator-stored or cooked properly and then stored in the refrigerator.

For more information about storing food safely, call the Home and Garden Information Center toll-free at 1-888-656-9988 and request [HGIC 3480, \*Food Selection & Storage\*](#), [HGIC 3505, \*Safe Handling of Canned Goods\*](#), or [HGIC 3522, \*Food Storage: Refrigerator & Freezer\*](#).

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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 09/04.)

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