

Freezing Prepared Foods

Preparing food ahead of time and freezing it can save time, add variety to your menu, offer quick meals for unexpected company and provide nutritious choices for busy days. When you are preparing a main dish, it takes only a little more effort and time to make enough for several meals. You can freeze all of the prepared food in meal-size packages, or serve part of the food immediately and freeze the rest. While there are great advantages to freezing prepared foods, the cost of packaging, energy use, and freezer operation cost can be expensive. Cooking, freezing and reheating requires more fuel than cooking from scratch. Prepared foods have a relatively short storage life compared to frozen fruits, vegetables, and meat. Consider freezing:

- Leftovers that cannot be used immediately.
- Foods that take a long time to prepare.
- Seasonal fruits and vegetables.
- Foods you can prepare in quantity.
- Foods that still taste good after storage.

Hints for Freezing

- Select only fresh, high-quality ingredients because freezing does not improve quality.
- Slightly undercook prepared foods. They will finish cooking when reheated.
- Cool foods quickly before packaging. Place the pan of food in a large pan of ice water, crushed ice or ice cubes. Stirring will help cool the food faster.
- Freeze food promptly as soon as it is cooled to room temperature.
- Put no more unfrozen food in the freezer than will freeze within 24 hours. Usually this is 2 or 3 pounds per cubic foot of freezer capacity. Stack the food after it is frozen.
- Plan to use frozen prepared foods within a short time. Keep using foods from the

freezer and replenish with fresh stock. This makes greater use of freezer space, lowers the cost per pound of food stores, and keeps your store of food fresh.

- The temperature of the freezer should not go above 0 °F. Fluctuating temperatures and temperatures above 0 °F reduce quality.
- Foods that do not freeze well include mayonnaise, cream puddings and fillings, custard, gelatin salads, cheese, the whites of hard-cooked eggs and uncooked egg yolks, and gravies made with wheat flour.
- Since spices may change flavor over long storage, add just before serving.

Hints for Packaging

- Use freezer containers or wrappings of moisture and vapor-resistant material.
- Pack food compactly into the container to reduce air in the package. Allow headspace for expansion as food freezes.
- In quart containers, the food may be separated into two or three layers by a double thickness of a water-resistant wrap.
- Choose containers by the number of servings you will want. Quart containers hold four to six servings; pints, two to three.
- Use only containers with wide top openings. Food can then be removed without thawing.
- Freeze the prepared foods in your favorite casserole dish. The food can be removed after freezing, wrapped and returned to the freezer for storage.
- For microwave reheating, use microwave-safe plastic wrap for wrapping small amounts of breads. Casserole containers should be approved for microwave use.
- Label and date all packages, and keep an inventory of all frozen food.

Freezing Recommendations for Commonly Prepared Foods

Food	Preparation	Serving	Storage Time at 0 °F
Combination Dishes			
Stews Spaghetti with meat sauce Ravioli Lasagna Stuffed peppers or eggplant Rice dishes	Make as usual. Keep fat to minimum. Omit potatoes from stew. Slightly undercook other stew vegetables. Cool all combination dishes rapidly. Use rigid, wide-mouth containers. Be sure meat is covered with sauce or broth. Leave headspace. Or, freeze in foil-lined casserole dishes and after freezing, remove from dish and package.	Thaw in refrigerator. Reheat sold foods to at least 165°F within 2 hours at oven temperature of 325°F or higher. Reheat liquids to a rolling boil.	4-6 months
Meat pies	Make as usual. Cook until nearly done. Omit potatoes. Cool quickly. Do not use bottom crust. Pour meat mixture into casserole or individual containers. Top with pastry. Do not bake. Freeze pie before wrapping. Package.	Cut vents in crust. Bake without thawing, 400°F, 45 minutes for individual pies, 1 hour for larger pies, or until meat mixture is piping hot and crust golden brown. Bake until the pie reaches an internal temperature of at least 165°F.	4-6 months
Baked bean dishes	Make as usual. Use a minimum of bacon, ham or salt pork cut in small pieces. Bake until barely tender to avoid too much softening when reheated. Cool quickly. Package in rigid containers. Be sure all meat is covered. Leave headspace.	Heat over boiling water or in a saucepan with small amount of water added. Stir frequently to prevent sticking. Or, bake at 400 °F until internal temperature reads 165 °F. About 45 minutes for pints and 1 hour for quarts.	6 months
Meat			
Meat loaf	Prepare as usual. Do not put bacon strips on top. May bake if you wish. Package.	Unwrap and cook unbaked meat loaf at 350 °F to at least 160 °F. Previously baked: to serve cold, thaw in wrappings in refrigerator or to reheat, unwrap and bake unthawed at 350 °F, until all meat is at least 165 °F.	3-4 months
Roast - beef, pork or poultry.	Roast as usual. Remove as much fat as possible. Keep pieces large. Cut meat from the bone to save space. To keep meat from drying out, cover sliced meat with broth, sauce, or gravy and package in rigid containers leaving headspace.	Thaw in refrigerator and reheat in foil at 325 °F to 165 °F, about 15 or 20 minutes. Thaw meat with sauce in refrigerator 5-6 hours before reheating to 165 °F.	2-4 months

Freezing Recommendations for Commonly Prepared Foods (continued)

Food	Preparation	Serving	Storage Time at 0°F
Potatoes			
Mashed	Store leftovers in a straight-sided container; or add a beaten egg and shape into patties. Shape and store with double layer of paper between patties.	Thaw just enough to slip potatoes into top of double boiler; heat over boiling water to 165 °F. To fry, dip patties in flour and fry slowly without thawing.	2 weeks
Baked and Stuffed	Cut freshly baked potatoes in half lengthwise. Scoop out potato, leaving skin unbroken. Mash scooped-out potato and season. Pile into shells. Cool and wrap.	Remove from package or wrap. Place on baking sheet. Reheat at 400 °F to 165 °F and lightly browned, about 15 to 20 minutes. Add cheese if desired.	2-4 weeks
French Fries	Use a high-starch content potato for frying (Idaho or similar type). Fry in hot fat until a light brown. Drain, cool and dry pack (with head space) or tray pack. Package.	Spread on cookie sheet and place in 400 °F oven until thawed and crisp.	1-2 months
Sweet Potatoes, balls	Make mashed sweet potatoes. Form into balls. Brush with melted butter or margarine. Roll in crushed cereal flakes or finely chopped nuts. Freeze balls on baking sheet before packaging in rigid containers or freezer bags. Fill air spaces with freezer paper.	Bake on greased baking sheet, 350 °F, 25-30 minutes. They should be steaming hot before serving.	1 month
Compartment Plates or Trays			
Roast beef, corn, & spinach Ham slice, sweet potato & broccoli Sliced turkey, dressing or stuffed baked potato, & mixed vegetables	Package foods together that have similar storage and heating times. Most vegetables need only blanching before freezing. Leftovers may be used. Sauces may be added. Package in foil trays, individual servings preferred. Cover with aluminum foil and package.	Take off outer wrapper. Do not thaw. Heat, covered with foil, at 400 °F for 20 to 30 minutes. For crisp foods, uncover the last 10 to 15 minutes.	1 month
Breads			
Biscuits and Quick Breads, (gingerbread, nut and fruit bread, coffee cake)	Prepare as usual, cool. Freeze in pan and cover tightly or package in aluminum foil for reheating.	Thaw in wrapping at room temperature or heat in pan or foil at 400 °F oven until hot. Slice fruit and nut breads while partially frozen to prevent crumbling.	Biscuits 2-3 months; Quick breads 2-4 months
Muffins	Make as usual. Package.	Thaw in wrapping at room temperature, 1 hour, or heat unthawed at 300 °F, 15-20 min.	6-12 months

Freezing Recommendations for Commonly Prepared Foods (continued)

Food	Preparation	Serving	Storage Time at 0°F
Waffles	Cook to a light brown. Separate in layers in plastic container or freeze separately and then package.	Heat without thawing in the toaster until hot and crispy or heat on a baking sheet at 400 °F, 2-3 minutes.	1-2 months
Yeast: rolls, sweet rolls, loaves, coffee cake	Bake before freezing, cool, then cover pan tightly or place product in foil.	Reheat in pan or foil at 300 °F for 15 to 20 minutes.	6-8 months
Unbaked coffee cakes, bread and rolls	Use only recipes especially developed for freezing the dough.	Follow the recipe directions.	Up to 1 month
Brown'N Serve rolls	Make as usual but let rise slightly less after molding. Bake at 325 °F for 30 minutes. Do not brown. Cool. Package. Likely to dry out more in rebaking than when completely baked first and reheated.	Thaw in wrappings 10 to 15 minutes. Heat to 300 °F, for 10 minutes or until light brown. If undercrust is too moist, bake on cooling rack instead of baking sheet.	6-8 months
Sandwiches	Use day-old bread, spread to edges with soft butter or margarine. Add filling and spread evenly. Omit crisp vegetables, hard-cooked egg white, tomato, jellies and jams. Mayonnaise tends to separate. Use salad dressing or home-cooked dressing. Package.	Thaw in refrigerator in wrappings. Sandwiches for grilling, such as cheese or ham, should be thawed before grilling. Frozen sandwiches may be thawed in a lunch box for 3-4 hours maximum.	Cheese, ham, bologna: 3-4 weeks; Others: 3-6 months
Cakes			
Shortened cakes	Prepare and bake as usual in layers or loaf pan. Cool. Remove from pans and wrap tightly. Loaf cake may be cut to family-size pieces before wrapping. For best results, freeze cake and frosting separately. See note below.*	Thaw cake in wrapping at room temperature. Ice and serve.	2-4 months
Angel food, chiffon, sponge cakes	Bake thoroughly; cool. Frosted: Freeze before wrapping. Do not use egg white frosting. Unfrosted: Wrap and freeze. Place in container that will prevent crushing. *Note: Fudge frosting and powdered sugar icings made with fat freeze well. Cooked candy-type frostings may stay soft and creamy between layers, but often crack and crumble on outside of cake.	Frosted or filled: Unwrap and thaw in refrigerator. Unfrosted: Thaw in wrap on rack 1 to 2 hours at room temperature. If wrapped in aluminum foil, thaw at 300 °F. for 15 to 20 minutes.	Egg-white cakes: 6 months Whole-egg cakes: 4-6 months Egg-yolk cakes: 2 months

Freezing Recommendations for Commonly Prepared Foods (continued)

Food	Preparation	Serving	Storage Time at 0°F
Cupcakes	Make as usual. Cool completely before wrapping. Package.	Thaw at room temperature (takes about 1 hour.) If unfrosted, thaw in aluminum foil, 300 °F for 10 minutes.	2-3 months
Cookies			
Baked	Prepare and bake as stated in recipe. Cool thoroughly. Package in foil or rigid container with two layers of waxed paper between cookies.	Thaw in containers at room temperature. Remove from containers and serve.	6 months
Unbaked	Refrigerator cookies: Form dough into roll. Slice if desired. Package in moisture- and vapor-resistant paper. Drop cookies: Drop on sheet or just package bulk dough.	Thaw dough in refrigerator. Firm cookie dough may be sliced before completely thawed and baked.	6 months
Pies			
Baked fruit, mince, nut pies	Make as usual. Cool rapidly. Freeze before packaging. Pies are easier to wrap after freezing.	Thaw in refrigerator or let stand at room temperature about 15 minutes, then heat in 350 °F oven until warm, about 30 min.	3-4 months
Unbaked fruit, mince, nut pies (unbaked fruit pies have a better fresh-fruit flavor than frozen baked pies, but bottom crust tends to get soggy)	Make as usual except add 1 extra tablespoon flour or tapioca or ½ tablespoon cornstarch to juicy fillings to prevent boiling over when pies are later baked. Do not cut vents in top crust. Steam and cool light fruits before making pies. Freeze in pan. Package. Fruit fillings may be thickened and cooled before adding to crust.	Unwrap and cut vent holes in upper crust. Put pan on cookie sheet. Bake without thawing at 450 °F, 15 to 20 minutes. Reduce heat to 375 °F for 20 to 30 minutes or until top crust is brown.	Fruit pies: 3-4 months Mince pies: 6-8 months Nut pies: 3-4 months
Chiffon	Make with gelatin base. May wish to freeze before wrapping to keep top from sticking to freezer wrap.	Unwrap; thaw in refrigerator for 1 to 2 hours.	2 weeks
Pumpkin	Prepare pie shell and filling as usual. Have filling cold before adding to unbaked chilled pie shell. Package same as fruit pies.	Bake without thawing at 400 °F for 10 min. Then reduce to 325 °F to finish baking.	4-5 weeks
Fruit pie fillings	Make as usual. Package. Leave headspace.	Thaw just enough to spread in pie crust.	6-8 months

Problem Foods

- Unbaked biscuits will be smaller and less tender. Unbaked muffins are likely to have poor texture.
- Custards and cream pies soak into the crust.
- Meringue on meringue pies toughens and sticks to the wrapper.
- Milk sauces sometimes curdle and separate. Stirring while reheating helps keep them smooth. Using waxy rice flour or waxy corn flour as the thickener also helps.
- Gravy tends to separate and curdle when thawed. It is better to freeze broth and make gravy just before serving. Or use waxy rice flour or waxy corn flour as the thickener.
- Cooked, creamed vegetables tend to lose flavor rapidly and should only be stored for a few days. Cook vegetables. Cool quickly. Add sauce. Package. Leave headspace.
- Lettuce, other greens and raw tomatoes lose crispness and become soggy.
- Ham and other cured meats may lose color when frozen and become rancid more quickly than other meats.

Sources:

1. Reynolds, Susan and Paulette Williams. So Easy to Preserve. Bulletin 989. Cooperative Extension Service, the University of Georgia. Fifth Edition revised by Elizabeth Andress and Judy Harrison. 2006.
2. Riddle, Katherine and Anna Mae Brenner (1989). Home Freezing of Cooked and Prepared Food. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1816&context=extensionhist>

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