

How to Freeze Home-Prepared Foods

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It's easy to keep your freezer stocked with home-prepared "convenience" foods ranging from sack lunches to elaborate dishes for unexpected company. By planning a steady flow of main dishes, baked goods and desserts in and out of your freezer, you make good use of your time and freezer.



Advantages of freezing home-prepared foods

- Foods are prepared at your convenience, and time is saved by doubling or tripling recipes that require a lot of preparation time. Extras are frozen for later.
- The oven is used more efficiently by baking more than enough for one meal at a time.
- Waste is avoided by freezing leftover prepared foods and serving them later as "planned overs."
- Special diet foods, baby foods or single portions can be prepared in quantity and frozen for later use.

Disadvantages

- Freezing is an expensive form of food preservation if the cost of the freezer, packaging and energy are considered.
- Cooking, freezing and reheating require more energy than simply preparing enough food for one meal at a time.
- Most frozen prepared foods have a short storage life compared to frozen fruits, vegetables and meat.
- Unless you have a microwave oven, thawing time must be considered for many prepared foods.

Preparing food to freeze

If you aren't sure if the quality of a prepared food will be acceptable, freeze a small portion the first time.

Slightly undercook prepared foods that will be reheated before serving to help avoid overcooking. Undercooking is especially important for dishes containing pasta.

Cool foods quickly for safety and freshness. Cool hot prepared foods such as main dishes and sauces quickly in their original pan placed in a larger pan, in a sink filled with ice water. Keep foods covered to prevent contamination and loss of aroma and moisture. Change ice water frequently. Foods can also be cooled in their original container by placing them directly into the refrigerator. When cool, package and freeze immediately. This

process is especially important when preparing large amounts of food. It is absolutely unsafe to cool foods containing meat, fish, poultry, eggs or dairy products at room temperature because doing so increases the likelihood of food spoilage and resulting foodborne illness.

Package foods in the appropriate freezer containers or wraps in the amounts you will use at one time. Prepared food may also be frozen directly in the casserole or baking dish. If the dish has a cover, it can be used, but first put a layer of plastic wrap directly on the food surface to prevent moisture loss and then seal the edges with freezer tape. Straight-sided dishes can be freed for other uses by lining them with heavy-duty aluminum foil before filling. After the product has been baked and frozen, remove it from the dish, complete wrapping, seal, label and freeze immediately. Use the same dish later to reheat and serve the food.

Package foods to be reheated in a microwave oven in freezer- or microwave-safe containers.

Cheese or crumb toppings for casseroles should be added when the dish is being heated to serve. If put on before freezing, these toppings become soggy or too dry.

Use leftovers to make your own "TV dinners." Fill divided foil trays, cover tightly with aluminum foil, and overwrap with freezer paper or a freezer bag. If foods are to be reheated in a microwave oven, use microwave-safe containers.

Freeze in small amounts those handy extras that are needed occasionally for special recipes: lemon and orange rind, grated cheese, crumbled bacon, bread or cookie crumbs, and croutons.

Foods will still be safe to eat after the recommended storage time if the freezer temperature has been kept at 0 degrees F; however, quality will decline.

Note

Cold glass dishes may break if put into a preheated oven unless the manufacturer specifies that the dish is freezer-to-oven safe.

Thawing and preparing

Most main dishes can be reheated with or without thawing.

There is no absolute rule as to how long frozen main dishes such as casseroles should be reheated. If no time is given in this guide, these tips may help: Use the oven setting at which the dish was originally cooked. Start with less than double the original cooking time. For example, if a casserole was originally cooked for 30 minutes, start with about 50 minutes from the frozen state, but check it carefully toward the end of the 50 minutes to prevent overcooking. Appearance is a good clue for casserole-type dishes. Their edges should be bubbling and the center should be hot and have an internal temperature of 165 degrees F.

For speedy reheating of foods such as noodle casseroles or creamy foods without excessive stirring, heat in a double boiler. Start with warm, not hot, water in the lower pan to prevent food from sticking and becoming mushy. Partial thawing in the refrigerator will speed up the heating process and result in more even heat penetration.

Microwave ovens do an excellent job of reheating frozen prepared foods without that "warmed over" flavor. Refer to individual manufacturer's directions for times.

Because of their low water content, most baked goods, except fruit pies, thaw rapidly. It is safe to thaw baked goods, except those with filling, at room temperature. Keep baked products in their original wrapping to prevent drying out and to keep moisture from condensing on the surface.

Note: Foods containing meat, fish, poultry, eggs or dairy products must be thawed in the refrigerator, and these foods must be kept chilled until reheated.

Baked products and doughs

Biscuits

Prepare and bake until light brown. Cool, package and freeze. To serve hot, heat unthawed at 350 degrees F for 15 to 20 minutes.

Frozen unbaked biscuits are smaller and less tender when baked.

Freezer storage time

2 to 3 months

Quick breads (nut, fruit, coffee cake and gingerbread)

Prepare and bake as usual. Cool, package and freeze. Thaw in wrapping at room temperature for 1 to 2 hours. Slice fruit and nut breads while still partially frozen to avoid crumbling. Heat in foil at 400 degrees F.

Freezer storage time

2 to 4 months

Muffins

Prepare and bake as usual. Cool, package and freeze. Thaw in wrapping at room temperature for 1 hour. Or heat unthawed at 300 degrees F for 20 minutes.

Note

Frozen unbaked muffins have a poor texture when baked.

Freezer storage time

6 to 12 months

Waffles

Prepare batter as usual, and bake to a light brown. Cool, package with a double sheet of freezer paper between them for easy removal, and freeze. Reheat unthawed in a toaster, under a broiler, or on a baking sheet in a 400 degrees F oven for 2 to 3 minutes.

Freezer storage time

1 to 2 months

Doughnuts

Prepare as usual. Cool, package and freeze. Yeast doughnuts freeze better than cake-type. Glaze will soak into doughnuts when frozen and thawed, so apply glaze just before serving. Thaw at 400 degrees F for 5 to 10 minutes or in wrapping at room temperature if they do not contain cream filling. Thaw cream-filled doughnuts in a refrigerator.

Freezer storage time

3 to 4 weeks

Bread, coffee cake and rolls (baked)

Prepare as usual. Cool, package and freeze. Thaw at room temperature. To serve hot, heat in foil at 300 degrees F for 15 minutes. For rolls, heat in foil at 300 degrees F for 5 to 10 minutes.

Freezer storage time

3 months for baked; 6 to 8 months for partially baked

Bread, coffee cake and rolls (unbaked)

Use only recipes developed especially for freezing unbaked dough. Follow recipe directions.

Freezer storage time

Up to 1 month

Brown and serve rolls

Prepare as usual, but let rise slightly less after shaping. Bake at 275 degrees F for 20 minutes. Do not brown. Cool, package and freeze. Thaw in wrapping at room temperature for 10 to 15 minutes. Bake at 425 degrees F for 5 to 10 minutes or until light brown. If undercrust is too moist, bake on cooling rack instead of baking sheet.

Freezer storage time

6 to 8 months

Layer, loaf, cupcakes, angel, chiffon, sponge and fruitcakes (baked)

Prepare as usual, bake and cool. Freeze whole cakes, meal-sized portions, or slices. Place a double layer of freezer paper between slices for easy removal. To prevent crushing, freeze whole cakes in boxes. For best results, freeze cake and frosting separately; frosted cakes should be quick-frozen on a tray before packaging. Best frostings for freezing include fudge frosting or confectioner's sugar icing. Do not freeze seven-minute frosting or frosting made with egg whites. Frosted or filled cakes should be thawed in the refrigerator. Unfrosted cakes can be thawed in their wrapping at room temperature.

Freezer storage time

About 3 months

Cookies (baked)

Prepare as usual. Cool, package with freezer paper between layers, and freeze. Thaw in wrapping at room temperature.

Freezer storage time

3 months

Cookies (unbaked)

For refrigerator cookies: Prepare as usual, form into roll, package, seal and freeze. Slice and bake unthawed refrigerator cookies according to recipe.

For bulk cookie dough: Prepare dough as usual, package, seal and freeze. Thaw dough in the refrigerator until soft enough to drop by teaspoons. Bake according to recipe.

Freezer storage time

3 months

Cream puffs and eclair shells

Prepare as usual. Cool. Slit, and remove moist inside parts. Do not fill before freezing. Tray freeze, package, and return to freezer immediately. Thaw in wrapping at room temperature. Fill. Keep refrigerated until served.

Freezer storage time

1 to 2 months

Unbaked pastry

Prepare regular pastry or crumb crust. Fit into pie pans. Generously prick pastry that will be baked unfilled. Stack pie pans with a double layer of freezer paper between them. Or store flat rounds of pastry on foil-covered cardboard separated by two layers of freezer paper. Overwrap with freezer bags or heavy-duty aluminum foil, seal and freeze. Bake unthawed pie shell at 475 degrees F until light brown. Or fill and bake as per recipe.

Freezer storage time

6 to 8 weeks

Baked pastry

Prepare and bake pastry as usual. Cool, package and freeze. Thaw in wrapping at room temperature.

Note

Meringue toppings toughen during freezer storage and stick to wrapping. Add just before serving.

Freezer storage time

2 to 3 months

Chiffon pies

Prepare with a gelatin base. Tray freeze before packaging to keep top from sticking to freezer wrap. Package and return to freezer immediately. Thaw in the refrigerator.

Freezer storage time

2 weeks

Fruit, mince and nut pies (unbaked)

Frozen unbaked pies have a better fresh-fruit flavor than frozen baked pies, but their bottom crusts tend to get soggy. Thicken fruit fillings with instant tapioca, and cool before pouring into crust. (See also "mochiko" in Soups and sauces section.) The filling for frozen pies should be slightly thicker than usual. Do not cut vents in top crust. Tray freeze, package and return to freezer immediately. Cut vent holes in upper crust, and bake unthawed pie on baking sheet at 450 degrees F for 15 to 20 minutes. Then reduce heat to 375 degrees F for 20 to 30 minutes, or until top crust is brown.

Freezer storage time

8 months for fruit pies; 6 to 8 months for mince pies; 3 to 4 months for nut pies

Fruit pie fillings

Freeze separately in rigid containers, leaving ½-inch headspace. Thaw in refrigerator just until it can easily be spread in pastry.

Freezer storage time

6 to 8 months

Fruit, mince and nut pies (baked)

Prepare as usual. Cool rapidly, tray freeze, package and return to freezer immediately. Thaw at room temperature for 15 minutes. Then bake in 350 degrees F oven about 30 minutes, until warm.

Freezer storage time

3 to 4 months

Pumpkin pie

Prepare pie shell and filling as usual. Add cold filling to unbaked cold pie shell. Tray freeze, package and return to freezer immediately. Bake without thawing at 400 degrees F for 10 minutes. Reduce heat to 325 degrees F to finish baking until set.

Note

Custard and cream pies soak into the crust when frozen and do not produce a quality product.

Freezer storage time

4 to 5 weeks

Main dishes and combination foods

Casseroles containing meat (stews, spaghetti sauce, etc.)

Prepare as usual, keeping fat to a minimum. Omit potatoes from stews, and slightly undercook other stew vegetables. Cool rapidly, package, leave headspace and freeze. Be sure meat is covered with sauce or broth. Thaw partially in refrigerator to prevent overcooking. Reheat in top of double boiler, or replace in casserole dish and heat uncovered in oven. Reheat liquids to a rolling boil.

Freezer storage time

3 months

Nonmeat casseroles (macaroni and cheese)

Prepare as usual, but slightly undercook pasta. Cool rapidly, package, leave headspace and freeze. Thaw partially in refrigerator to prevent overcooking. Reheat in top of double boiler, or replace in casserole dish and heat uncovered in oven until its internal temperature reaches 165 degrees F.

Freezer storage time

3 months

Creamed meat, fish and poultry

Use a recipe with a small amount of fat. Prepare as usual, cool rapidly, package and freeze.

Thaw in refrigerator. Reheat to an internal temperature of at least 165 degrees F for 2 hours at 325 degrees F or higher. Stir occasionally to make smooth. Alternatively, you can heat frozen product over boiling water, stirring occasionally to make smooth. This process takes about 30 minutes per pint.

Freezer storage time

2 to 4 months

Dressing

Prepare as usual, cool rapidly, package and freeze. Partially thaw dressing in refrigerator. Add a small amount of water, and reheat in a double boiler or place in a greased casserole and reheat in an oven at 325 degrees F until hot, or to an internal temperature of at least 165 degrees F.

Freezer storage time

1 month

Fish loaves

Prepare as usual, but do not bake or put bacon strips on top. Pack into loaf pan, seal and freeze. Thaw in refrigerator for 1 to 2 hours. Unwrap and bake at 450 degrees F for 15 minutes. Reduce temperature to 350 degrees F, and finish baking to an internal temperature of 165 degrees F.

Freezer storage time

1 to 2 months

Fried meat and poultry

Fry as usual until almost done. Drain well, and cool rapidly. Tray freeze, package and return to freezer immediately. Thaw in refrigerator. Place in shallow pan, and heat uncovered at 350 degrees F for 30 to 45 minutes or until its internal temperature reaches 165 degrees F. Frozen fried meat and poultry might lose fresh flavor and crispness.

Freezer storage time

1 to 3 months

Meals (TV dinners)

Use foods recommended for freezing in this Quality for Keeps freezer series. Prepare as usual. Leftovers may be used. Package in individual servings or in sectioned foil trays. Individual servings are the preferred packaging method. Cover with aluminum foil, overwrap with freezer paper or a freezer bag, and freeze.

To reheat, take off overwrap. Do not thaw meal or remove foil. Heat in an oven at 400 degrees F for 20 to 30 minutes. For crisp foods, uncover last 10 to 15 minutes of baking time.

Freezer storage time

1 month

Meat loaf

Prepare as usual. Do not put bacon strips on top. Can be frozen baked or unbaked. Package and freeze.

To prepare unbaked: Do not thaw. Unwrap and bake at 350 degrees F for about 1½ hours, or until its internal temperature reaches at least 165 degrees F.

To prepare baked: To serve cold, thaw in wrapping in the refrigerator. To serve hot, do not thaw. Unwrap and bake at 350 degrees F about 1 hour, or until its internal temperature reaches at least 165 degrees F.

Freezer storage time

3 to 4 months

Meat pie

Prepare meat-vegetable filling. Cook until nearly done. Omit potatoes. Cool rapidly. Do not use a bottom crust. Pour meat-vegetable mixture into casserole or individual containers. Top with pastry. Do not bake. Tray freeze, package and return to freezer immediately.

To prepare

Do not thaw. Cut vents in crust, and bake at 400 degrees F for about 45 minutes for individual pies or about 1 hour for larger pies, or until meat mixture is hot and crust is golden brown and its internal temperature reaches at least 165 degrees F.

Freezer storage time

4 to 6 months

Pizza

Prepare as usual, but do not bake. Tray freeze, package and return to freezer immediately.

To prepare

Unwrap and bake unthawed for 15 to 20 minutes at 450 degrees F.

Freezer storage time

1 month

Roast (beef, pork or poultry)

Roast as usual. Remove as much fat as possible. Keep pieces large. Turkey and other large fowl should be cut from the bones to save freezer space. Ham and other cured meats lose color when frozen and become rancid more quickly than other meats. For short storage, roast may be packaged without sauce or gravy. To keep meat from drying out during longer storage, cover sliced meat with gravy or sauce. Package in rigid containers, leave headspace and freeze.

To prepare

Thaw meat without gravy in wrapping in the refrigerator. Heat covered at 325 degrees F for 15 to 20 minutes to an internal temperature of 165 degrees F. Thaw meat with gravy in the refrigerator for 5 to 6 hours, and then reheat to 165 degrees F. Do not refreeze.

Freezer storage time

2 to 4 months

Appetizers

Spread thin layer of butter on bread to prevent soaking or drying. Prepare as usual. Tray freeze spread in single layers on trays, and then use shallow, airtight containers for packaging, separating layers with a double layer of freezer wrap. Package toast and other crisp appetizers separately.

To serve

About 1 hour before serving, arrange frozen appetizers on serving trays, and cover. Let thaw at room temperature.

Caution

Appetizers containing perishable foods such as meat, fish, poultry or dairy products should not remain at room temperature for more than 2 hours because of the possibility of food poisoning.

Freezer storage time

3 to 4 weeks

Soups and sauces

Soups and purees

Prepare as usual; concentrate by using less liquid if possible. Omit potatoes. Cool rapidly, package in rigid containers, leave headspace and freeze. Or freeze in clean ice cube trays. When frozen, store cubes in freezer containers or bags.

To prepare

Heat without thawing. Cream-based soups should be heated over boiling water and stirred frequently for a smooth texture. Reheat to a rolling boil, or to a temperature of at least 165 degrees F.

Freezer storage time

4 to 6 months

Sauces for desserts and meats

Prepare as usual. Because flavorings and spices change flavor during freezer storage, add just before serving. Package in rigid containers, leave headspace and freeze. Thaw in package in refrigerator. Reheat sauce to be served hot to a rolling boil, or to a temperature of at least 165 degrees F, while stirring.

Note

Milk sauces and gravies often curdle or separate after freezing. Stirring during reheating helps keep a smooth texture. Using waxy rice flour or waxy corn flour as the thickener also helps. If you freeze a lot of prepared foods, it will be worth your while to look for "mochiko," a special waxy rice flour that can often be purchased at oriental food stores. Sauces, pie fillings and gravies thickened with mochiko before freezing are smooth and elastic and do not curdle or separate when thawed.

Freezer storage time

3 to 4 months

Vegetable dishes

Beets (Harvard)

Prepare as usual, but heat only until mixture begins to simmer. Cool rapidly. Package in rigid containers, leaving headspace.

To prepare

Thaw partially in the refrigerator, and heat in a double boiler or in a saucepan over low heat. Add extra water if necessary, and stir occasionally.

Freezer storage time

4 months

Beans (baked)

Prepare as usual. Use only a small amount of bacon, ham or salt pork cut in small pieces. Bake until beans are barely tender to avoid overcooking when reheating. Cool rapidly. Package in rigid containers, cover beans and meat with liquid, leave headspace and freeze.

To prepare: Thaw in the refrigerator, and then heat in a double boiler or in a saucepan over low heat. Add a little extra water, and stir frequently to prevent sticking. Or bake at 400 degrees F for 45 minutes for pints and 1 hour for quarts, to at least 165 degrees F.

Freezer storage time

6 months

Potatoes (baked or stuffed)

Prepare as usual. Cool. Wrap individually in foil, and overwrap in freezer.

To prepare

Unwrap, and bake unthawed at 400 degrees F to 165 degrees F and lightly browned, or about 15 to 20 minutes.

Freezer storage time

2 to 4 weeks

Potatoes (scalloped)

Prepare as usual, and bake until almost tender and a delicate brown color. Cool rapidly in baking dish. Package and freeze.

To prepare

For a shorter heating period, partially thaw in the refrigerator. Or bake unthawed at 400 degrees F to 165 degrees F. Add extra milk if necessary.

Freezer storage time

2 weeks

Sweet potato balls

Prepare mashed sweet potatoes. Form into balls, brush with melted butter or margarine, and roll in crushed cereal flakes or finely chopped nuts. Tray freeze balls on baking sheets, and then package in rigid containers or freezer bags. Fill air spaces with crumpled freezer wrap.

To prepare: Bake unthawed on greased baking sheets at 350 degrees F to 165 degrees F, or 25 to 30 minutes.

Note

Cooked, creamed vegetables lose flavor rapidly and are not recommended for freezer storage.

Freezer storage time

1 month

Fruit dishes

Apples (baked)

Prepare as usual, baking only until barely done. Cool rapidly. Wrap each apple individually in foil, package in rigid containers, and freeze.

To serve hot

Unwrap, and heat unthawed at 350 degrees F for 15 to 20 minutes.

Freezer storage time

2 months

Salads with base of whipped cream, cottage cheese or mayonnaise

Prepare as usual, and pour into individual molds or one large mold. Cover top with freezer paper, and overwrap in freezer paper or heavy-duty foil. Or line muffin tins with film wrap, fill with salad mixture, and freeze. When frozen, wrap salads individually and store in freezer bags in the freezer. To serve, thaw in the refrigerator.

Freezer storage time

2 months

Gelatin-based salads

Experiment with freezing gelatin salads before serving to company. Use only three-fourths of the total liquid called for in a recipe. Prepare gelatin base, and refrigerate until syrupy. Prepare filling of chopped fruit, vegetables, chopped nuts, flaked fish, chicken or turkey. Whipped cream, cottage cheese, softened cream cheese or mayonnaise can also be mixed in and improve the texture of frozen gelatin salads.

Line a square pan with film wrap, and pour in about one-third of the syrupy gelatin. Put in the freezer for a short period to set up further. Fold remaining gelatin into the filling, and pour gently over the frozen gelatin. Freeze, and then remove from pan and complete the wrapping with freezer wrap or heavy-duty foil. Return to freezer immediately.

Serve nearly frozen on bed of lettuce, or thaw for about an hour in the refrigerator. Return to original pan for thawing.

Note

Fresh pineapple and fresh kiwi fruit should not be used because they contain an enzyme that prevents a gel from forming. Canned or frozen pineapple or kiwi fruit can be used successfully because they have been heated in processing (heating destroys the enzyme).

Note

Plain gelatin should not be frozen, as it toughens and "weeps."

Freezer storage time

2 weeks

Desserts and sweets

Candies

Homemade candies such as fudge, divinity, brittle, taffy, creams and caramels may be frozen. Prepare as usual. Wrap each piece individually in film wrap, and package in rigid freezer containers to avoid crushing. Thaw in the package at room temperature or in the refrigerator. Fat "bloom," which develops in chocolate candy during freezing, should disappear. Cracks in brittle candies, chocolate-covered nuts, and a few creams should disappear when candies are thawed.

Note: Do not freeze chocolate-covered cherries, because they expand and break open during freezing. Fat "bloom," which appears on the surface of chocolate during freezing, should disappear when candies are thawed.

Freezer storage time

1 year

Cheesecake (baked)

Prepare as usual, bake, and cool. Tray freeze, wrap, and refreeze in rigid containers to prevent crushing.

Freezer storage time

4 weeks

Homemade ice cream (plain or frozen in pies, cakes or rolls)

Prepare as usual. Freeze in container it is made in before repackaging in rigid container. If container is only partially filled, fill to top with crumpled freezer wrap. Seal and freeze. Thaw in refrigerator until soft enough to serve.

Freezer storage time

1 to 2 months

Ices, mousses, sherbets, fruit sponges, Bavarians

Use recipes with a gelatin, marshmallow or cooked base. Do not use whipped egg whites.

For ices, mousses and sherbets: Mix, pour into rigid containers, and freeze.

For sponges and Bavarians: Be sure they freeze before they set to prevent leaking when thawed. Sponges and Bavarians can be frozen directly in molds. Thaw all in refrigerator only until soft enough to serve.

Freezer storage time

2 months for mousses, sponges and Bavarians; 6 months for ices and sherbets

Pudding (steamed)

Prepare as usual. Cool and package in baking mold. Overwrap, and seal with freezer tape; or package in freezer bags. Thaw in refrigerator.

Freezer storage time

2 months

References

- Andress, E.L., and J. A. Harrison. 2014. *So easy to preserve*, 6th ed. Bulletin 989. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service.