

Freezing Prepared Foods

Preparing food ahead of time and freezing it can save time, energy and money. Frozen cooked foods also 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. It is more economical to make your own supply of prepared dishes than to purchase commercially prepared foods. 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. Use a fan to cool foods that cannot be stirred.
- 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 headroom 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.
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Freezing Recommendations for Commonly Prepared Foods

Food	Preparation	Serving	Storage Time
Combination Dishes			
Baked beans and other bean dishes; rice or spaghetti dishes; lasagna; chow mein; soups; stuffed peppers or eggplants; meat pies	Use a minimum of bacon, ham or salt pork; omit potatoes in soups and meat pies. Cook until nearly done, and cool by setting pan or oven/freezer- tempered baking dish in a shallow pan of ice water. Stir occasionally. Wrap package compactly to eliminate air space and freeze promptly. For meat pies, use top crust only and freeze unbaked pie before wrapping.	Partially thaw in refrigerator to prevent overcooking and heat in top of double boiler, or at 400 °F for 30-45 minutes. For meat pies, cut vent in crust and bake without thawing at 400 °F for 45 to 60 minutes, or until piping hot and crust is golden brown.	4-6 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 for 1½ hours, previously baked for 1 hour or until hot.	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 for 15-20 minutes. Unthawed meat with sauce may be slowly heated on top of stove or in oven.	2-4 months
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. Dip patties in flour and fry slowly without thawing.	2-4 weeks
Stuffed (baked)	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 325 to 350 °F until piping hot. Add cheese if desired.	1 month
French Fries	Use a high-starch content potato for frying (Idaho or similar type). Fry in hot fat until a light brown.	Spread on cookie sheet and place in 400 °F oven until thawed and crisp.	1-2 months
Sweet Potatoes	Dip boiled, peeled potatoes in lemon juice or package with cooking water around them. Freeze candied or mashed potatoes in a casserole. Leave skin on baked potatoes.	Reheat in 325 to 350 °F oven until hot throughout.	3 months

Freezing Recommendations for Commonly Prepared Foods (continued)

Food	Preparation	Serving	Storage Time
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. Sauces may be added. Package in foil trays.	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, muffins, coffee cake, fruit bread	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 in 325 to 350 °F oven until hot.	Biscuits, quick breads: 2-3 months; muffins: 6-12 months
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.	1-2 months
Yeast: rolls, sweet rolls, loaves, coffee cake	Dough may be shaped, placed in pans and frozen; or baked before freezing. Cover uncooked bread tightly and freeze before product rises. For baked bread, cool, then cover pan tightly or place product in foil.	For unbaked bread, uncover and let bread rise before baking. Bake at 350 to 375 °F. For baked bread, reheat in pan or foil at 300 °F for 15 to 20 minutes.	3-6 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 at room temperature in wrappings, 3 to 4 hours. Sandwiches for grilling, such as cheese or ham, should be thawed before grilling. Frozen sandwiches in a lunch box will keep other foods cool as they thaw.	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

Freezing Recommendations for Commonly Prepared Foods (continued)

Food	Preparation	Serving	Storage Time
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
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.	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.	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	Prepare as usual. Freeze, then wrap.	Unwrap; thaw in refrigerator for 1 to 2 hours.	2 weeks
Custard, Pumpkin	Bake until done. Cool quickly. May use fan. Wrap and freeze.	Unwrap; thaw in refrigerator or in 325 °F oven. Serve chilled or reheat in 375 °F oven	2 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. Riddle, Katherine and Anna Mae Brenner (1996). *Home Freezing of Cooked and Prepared Foods* [www document]. URL <http://www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/foods/g944.htm>
2. Reynolds, Susan (1993). *Freezing Prepared Foods* [www document]. URL <http://www.foodsafety.org/he/he484.htm>

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