



# Home Storage of Foods: Refrigerator and Freezer Storage

Bulletin: E340



## Cooperative Extension

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY HEALTH SCIENCES

*Daryl L. Minch, M.Ed., CFCS, Family and Community Health Sciences Educator, Somerset County*

### Quality and Safety

We store food to make meal preparation easier, take advantage of lower prices and to be prepared for emergencies. We want food to be safe and high quality. The quality of a food will be better if you use it within the recommended storage time.

Quality and safety are not the same. High quality food tastes, smells and looks good. A safe food will not make you sick. However, sometimes food contains microbes that can make people ill. These include: bacteria, viruses, molds and parasites. People need to be careful because an unsafe food may look and smell fine, but contain microbes that cause illness. For example, a huge pot of hot chili in the refrigerator will not cool quickly and may support bacterial growth that will make someone sick. On the other hand, chicken with freezer burn is safe, yet poor in quality. The goal of proper food storage is to provide both safe and high quality foods.

A food's quality depends on several factors: the condition of the raw food, how the food is made, the way the food is stored and the length of storage. For example, wrapping or covering food in the refrigerator will keep it from drying out. The following guidelines will help you keep food fresh and safe.

### Buy Good Quality

- Buy fresh fruits and vegetables that have good color and smell, and the right amount of softness or firmness for the food. Produce does not have to look "perfect"; small cuts, spots, soft spots or bruises are "ok". Avoid produce that is starting to show spoilage such as mold, major soft spots or deep cuts.

- Refrigerated foods should be cold with packages sealed and clean. Only buy what food you will use within the recommended storage times, so food does not spoil before use.
- Frozen foods should be frozen solid. Packages should not be discolored or have food residue on the outside since these may be signs of thawing and refreezing.
- Use dates on packaged foods, if available.
  - "Sell by date" is the last recommended day of sale in the store. These foods are safe to eat after this date, but may not taste as fresh. Examples: milk and other dairy foods.
  - "Use by" or "Best if Used By (or Before)" is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
  - "Expiration date" or "Do not use after" is the last day you should eat or use the food. The food may lose quality, may not work correctly in a recipe or it may be unsafe after that date. Yeast and infant formula have "expiration dates."
  - "Code date or number" is a number that the manufacturer uses to track their products. It does not tell you how long the food will be good in your home.

### Store It Right

If a food is not handled correctly, it will not keep very long. Follow the rule: **First In, First Out**. This means you use the oldest foods first. Put newly purchased foods behind the same foods already on the shelf. It may help to write purchase dates on products without dates on the package. Write dates on leftovers and foods you put in the freezer.

**RUTGERS**

New Jersey Agricultural  
Experiment Station

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
88 Lipman Drive, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8525  
Phone: 732.932.5000

## Refrigerator:

- **Keep a thermometer in the refrigerator and keep the temperature at 35° F to 40° F.**
- Open the door as little as possible. Every time the door opens, warm air enters which can raise the temperature of the refrigerator and lower food quality. It also increases electricity costs.
- Wrap or cover food to prevent the loss of flavor and moisture. It also prevents the mixing of flavors and odors, so your milk does not taste like onion or fish.
- Place raw meat, poultry, or fish on a plate or tray and put on the lowest shelf in the refrigerator. This will keep the food from dripping onto and contaminating other foods.
- Wrap or package leftovers to keep them from leaking and drying out. Plastic bags and containers work well. Most leftovers are best used within 3 to 4 days.



## Freezer:

- **Keep a thermometer in the freezer and keep the temperature at or below 0°F. If the temperature is higher than 0°F, the food will not keep its good quality as long.**
- Keep your freezer full with food or add ice. A full freezer holds its temperature better.
- Open the door as little as possible. Every time the door opens, warm air enters which can raise the temperature of the freezer and lower food quality. It also increases electricity costs.
- Wrap foods in moisture-proof, freezer-weight wrap or use plastic containers. Examples of wrap are plastic freezer bags, heavy foil, and freezer paper. Label and date packages.
- Keep a list of foods in the freezer. This will help with meal planning, knowing what to purchase, and minimize searching for food.

- Freezer burn on a food looks like a dry spot and food may be white or gray in color. It is the result of cold air getting to the food's surface and drying the food out. Freezer burn will not make you sick, but the food will be dry and tough. Wrapping food tightly and sealing out air will help protect the food.
- Ice crystals or frost may appear on food or in packaging during storage in the freezer. This is moisture evaporation from the food and will result in a dried out product. It is more common in baked goods, fruit and vegetables. Wrapping food tightly, sealing out air and following storage guidelines will help minimize moisture loss.
- Frozen food stored beyond the recommended time will be safe to eat. However, the food may be dried out, tough and flavor or texture may change.

## Keep It Clean

Since bacteria can get into food during food handling, keep everything – hands, counter tops, dishes, utensils, and the refrigerator and freezer - clean. Wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds before putting away groceries, preparing food, or putting away leftovers. This will greatly reduce the risk spreading bacteria and viruses and getting sick.

## For More Food Safety Information:

### Websites:

Rutgers Cooperative Extension: [njaes.rutgers.edu](http://njaes.rutgers.edu)

FightBAC!™: [www.fightbac.org](http://www.fightbac.org)

Food Safety and Inspection Service : [fsis.usda.gov](http://fsis.usda.gov)

General: [www.FoodSafety.gov](http://www.FoodSafety.gov)

### Telephone:

Call the county Cooperative Extension office or your county government. Offices are listed on the NJAES website.

USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline: Weekdays 10 to 4 PM EST, 1-800-535-4555

Food and Drug Administration Food Information Line: 1-888-723-3366



| <b>Food</b>   | <b>Refrigerator: 35° - 40°F</b><br>(*= <b>not recommended</b> ;<br>NA= <b>not applicable</b> ) | <b>Freezer: 0°F</b><br>(*= <b>not recommended</b> ;<br>NA= <b>not applicable</b> ) | <b>Notes</b>                                    |
|---|--|--|---|
| <b>DAIRY</b>  |  |  |   |
| Buttermilk  | 1-2 weeks  | 3 months   |   |
| Butter or margarine   | 1-3 months   | 6-9 months   | Read labels, some margarines do not freeze well |
| Condensed & evaporated milk (opened)                                | 4-5 days   | *  |   |
| Cottage cheese, Ricotta   | 1 week   | *  |   |
| Cream - heavy, whipping, half & half, light (unwhipped)             | 10 days  | *  |   |
| Cream - whipped in aerosol can                                      | 3 months   | *  |   |
| Milk  | 1 week   | 1 month  |   |
| Cheese (hard) - cheddar, Monterey Jack, swiss, block Parmesan, etc. | 6 months unopened & 3-4 months opened  | 6 months   |   |
| Cheese - grated or shredded   | 1 month  | 3-4 months   |   |
| Cheese - processed food products                                    | 3-4 weeks  | 4 months   |   |
| Cheese - cream (opened)   | 2 weeks  | *  |   |
| Cheese spreads & processed cheese                                   | 3-4 weeks  | *  |   |
| Ice cream, frozen yogurt  | *  | 2-4 months   |   |
| Sour cream  | 1-3 weeks  | *  |   |
| Yogurt  | 7-14 days  | 1-2 months   | Check package date                              |
| <b>BEEF, LAMB, PORK, VEAL</b>                                       |  |  |   |
| Chops   | 3-5 days   | 4-6 months   |   |
| Pre-stuffed uncooked chops  | 1 day  | *  |   |
| Roasts  | 3-5 days   | 4-12 months  |   |
| Steak   | 3-5 days   | 6-12 months  |   |
| Stew meat   | 1-2 days   | 3-4 months   |   |
| Ground meat   | 1-2 days   | 3-4 months   |   |
| Sausage, smoked - pepperoni, jerky                                  | 2-3 weeks  | 1-2 months   |   |
| Sausage - raw from chicken, turkey, beef or pork                    | 1-2 days   | 1-2 months   |   |
| Sausage - summer (labeled "keep refrigerated")                      | unopened - 3 months; opened 3 weeks  | 1-2 months   |   |

| Food  | Refrigerator: 35° - 40°F<br>(* = not recommended;<br>NA = not applicable) | Freezer: 0°F<br>(* = not recommended;<br>NA = not applicable)         | Notes  |
|---|---|---|--|
| <b>BEEF, LAMB, PORK, VEAL<br/>(cont'd)</b>            |   |   |  |
| Smoked breakfast links or patties                     | 7 days  | 1-2 months  |  |
| Whole ham (fully cooked)                              | 7 days  | 1-2 months  |  |
| Half ham (fully cooked)                               | 3-5 days  | 1-2 months  |  |
| Sliced ham (fully cooked)                             | 3-4 days  | 1-2 months  |  |
| Canned ham - labeled "keep refrigerated"              | 6-9 months unopened &<br>3-5 days opened                                  | 1-2 months  | Do not freeze in can   |
| Bacon   | 7 days  | 1 month   |  |
| Corned beef   | 5-7 days (in pouch with<br>juices)  | 1 month (drained)   |  |
| Hotdogs   | 2 weeks unopened &<br>1 week opened                                       | 1-2 months  |  |
| <b>OTHER MEATS</b>                                    |   |   |  |
| Bison (Buffalo)                                       | Ground or stew meat -<br>2 days; larger cuts -<br>3-5 days                | Ground or cut-up -<br>4 months; Chops, steak &<br>roasts - 6-9 months |  |
| Other game - Elk, rabbit                              | 3-5 days  | 6-9 months  | Less time for ground,<br>stew meat or chops.<br>Longer time for roast. |
| Smoked game, vacuum-sealed                            | Sealed - 2 weeks (or 1 week<br>after "Use-By" date); opened<br>7 days     | 1-2 months  |  |
| Variety Meats - heart, liver, kidney,<br>tongue, etc. | 1-2 days  | 3-6 months  |  |
| Venison - Roasts, steaks, chops                       | 3-5 days  | 9-12 months   | Less time for ground,<br>stew meat or chops.<br>Longer time for roast. |
| <b>DELI &amp; VACUUM-PACKED MEAT PRODUCTS</b>         |   |   |  |
| Lunch meats (vacuum packed &<br>unopened)             | 2 weeks   | 1-2 months  |  |
| Lunch meats (vacuum packed or<br>fresh cut, opened)   | 3-5 days  | 1-2 months  |  |
| <b>COOKED, LEFTOVER MEAT</b>                          |   |   |  |
| Meat & meat casseroles                                | 3-4 days  | 2-3 months  |  |
| Gravy & meat broth                                    | 3-4 days  | 2-3 months  |  |
| Soups & stews   | 3-4 days  | 2-3 months  |  |



| Food  | Refrigerator: 35° - 40°F<br>(* = not recommended;<br>NA = not applicable) | Freezer: 0°F<br>(* = not recommended;<br>NA = not applicable) | Notes   |
|---|---|---|---|
| <b>POULTRY PRODUCTS</b>   |   |   |   |
| Chicken or turkey, whole  | 1-2 days  | 1 year  |   |
| Chicken or turkey, pieces   | 1-2 days  | 9 months  |   |
| Giblets   | 1-2 days  | 3-4 months  |   |
| Ground turkey & chicken   | 1-2 days  | 3-4 months  |   |
| Duck, whole   | 1 day   | 6 months  |   |
| Game birds - goose,<br>pheasant, quail  | 1-2 days  | 6-12 months   |   |
| <b>COOKED, LEFTOVER POULTRY</b>   |   |   |   |
| Fried chicken   | 3-4 days  | 4 months  |   |
| Cooked casseroles   | 3-4 days  | 4-6 months  |   |
| Plain pieces  | 3-4 days  | 4 months  |   |
| Pieces with broth/gravy   | 3-4 days  | 6 months  |   |
| Nuggets or patties  | 3-4 days  | 1-3 months  |   |
|   |   |   |   |
| <b>EGGS</b>   |   |   |   |
| Fresh in shell  | 3-5 weeks   | *   |   |
| Raw yolks, whites   | 2-4 days  | 1 year  |   |
| Hardcooked  | 1 week  | *   |   |
| Liquid pasteurized eggs or<br>egg substitute  | 10 days unopened &<br>3 days opened                                       | unopened - 1 year; opened not<br>recommended                  |   |
| Eggnog  | commercial 3-5 days;<br>homemade 2-4 days                                 | commercial 6 months,<br>homemade not recommended              |   |
| <b>FISH</b>   |   |   | Keep finfish &<br>shellfish on ice in the<br>refrigerator |
| <b>Fresh finfish</b>  |   |   |   |
| Lean fish – cod, flounder,<br>haddock, halibut, pollack,<br>ocean perch, sea trout & rock<br>fish | 3 days  | 6-8 months  |   |
| Fatty fish – bluefish,<br>mackerel, mullet, smelts,<br>salmon, swordfish, trout,<br>tuna, etc.    | 3 days  | 2-3 months  |   |

| <b>Food</b>                                 | <b>Refrigerator: 35°- 40°F</b><br>(*= <b>not recommended</b> ;<br>NA= <b>not applicable</b> ) | <b>Freezer: 0°F</b><br>(*= <b>not recommended</b> ;<br>NA= <b>not applicable</b> ) | <b>Notes</b>   |
|---|---|--|--|
| <b>Fresh or live shellfish</b>              |   |  |  |
| Live crabs & lobster                        | 1-2 days  | *  |  |
| Live clams, mussels & oysters               | 4-5 days  | *  |  |
| Shrimp, scallops, crawfish, squid           | 4 days  | 5 months   |  |
| <b>Smoked fish</b>                          | 14 days   | 2 months   |  |
| <b>FRUITS</b>                               |   |  | Contact Family & Community Health Sciences for specific directions on how to freeze fruit. |
| Apples                                      | 6 weeks   | 12 months, cooked  |  |
| Apricots                                    | 3-4 days  | 12 months  |  |
| Bananas                                     | *   | 12 months  | Refrigerating bananas will cause the skin, but not the flesh to darken.                    |
| Berries                                     | 1-2 days  | 12 months  |  |
| Cherries                                    | 1 week  | 12 months  |  |
| Grapes                                      | 1 week  | 1 month  |  |
| Citrus: grapefruit, lemons, limes & oranges | 2-8 weeks   | 3-4 months   |  |
| Guavas                                      | 1-2 days  | 12 months  |  |
| Kiwis (Chinese gooseberry)                  | 1-2 days  | 12 months  |  |
| Mangos                                      | 2-3 days  | 12 months  |  |
| Melons                                      | 3-4 days  | 12 months  |  |
| Papayas                                     | 1 week  | 12 months  |  |
| Peaches & nectarines                        | 3-4 days  | 12 months  |  |
| Pears                                       | 3-4 days  | 12 months  |  |
| Pineapples                                  | 3-5 days  | 12 months  |  |
| Plantains                                   | *   | 12 months  |  |
| Plums                                       | 3 days  | 12 months  |  |
| Pomegranate                                 | 3 months whole  | 3 months - whole seeds   |  |
| Rhubarb                                     | 1 week  | 12 months  |  |
| <b>FRUIT JUICES</b>                         |   |  |  |
| Apple or Cider                              | 6 Days  | NA   |  |
| Bottled or canned (opened)                  | 3-4 Days  | NA   |  |
| Concentrate                                 | 6 Days  | 1 Year   |  |

| Food   | Refrigerator: 35° - 40°F<br>(* = not recommended;<br>NA = not applicable) | Freezer: 0°F<br>(* = not recommended;<br>NA = not applicable) | Notes   |
|--|---|---|---|
| <b>VEGETABLES</b>  |   |   | Contact Family & Community Health Sciences for specific directions on how to freeze vegetables. |
| Asparagus  | 3-4 days  | 12 months   |   |
| Avocados   | 3-5 days  | *   |   |
| Beans, shell - lima, fava, soy                                     | 2 -3 days in pod &<br>1-2 days shelled                                    | 12 months   |   |
| Beets  | 3 weeks   | 12 months   |   |
| Bok Choy   | 1-3 days  | 12 months   |   |
| Broccoli   | 4 days  | 12 months   |   |
| Brussel Sprouts  | 3-5 days  | 12 months   |   |
| Cabbage - green, red,<br>napa, savoy                               | 1-2 weeks   | 1 Year  | Freeze for cooked dishes only, otherwise soggy  |
| Carrots  | 2 weeks   | 12 months   |   |
| Cauliflower  | 5 days  | 12 months   |   |
| Celery   | 1-2 weeks   | 10-12 months  |   |
| Chilies & hot peppers  | 2 weeks   | 12 months   |   |
| Cilantro   | 1-3 days  | *   | Stand roots or stems in water & cover loosely with plastic bag in refrigerator                  |
| Corn   | 1-2 days  | On cob - 8-10 months;<br>kernals - 12 months                  | Use immediately for best flavor   |
| Cucumbers  | 1 week  | *   |   |
| Eggplant   | 3-4 days  | 12 months   |   |
| Green beans  | 3-5 days  | 8 months  |   |
| Greens – spinach, collards,<br>swiss chard, kale, mustard,<br>etc. | 1-2 days  | 10-12 months  |   |
| Jerusalem artichokes   | 1 week  | 12 months   |   |
| Jicama   | 2-3 weeks, uncut  | 12 months   |   |
| Kohlrabi - leaves  | 2-3 days  | 12 months   |   |
| Kohlrabi - stem  | 1 week  | 12 months   |   |
| Leeks  | 1 week  | 3-6 months  |   |
| Mushrooms  | 3-7 days  | 10-12 months  | Unopened, packaged mushrooms keep longest   |
| Onions, green - scallions  | 1-2 weeks   | 3-6 months  |   |
| Okra   | 3-4 days  | 12 months   |   |
| Parsley  | 2-3 days  | *   |   |

| Food  | Refrigerator: 35° - 40°F<br>(* = not recommended;<br>NA = not applicable)                                | Freezer: 0°F<br>(* = not recommended;<br>NA = not applicable) | Notes  |
|---|--|---|--|
| <b>VEGETABLES (cont'd)</b>                  |  |   |  |
| Peas  | 1-2 days   | 12 months   | use immediately for best flavor  |
| Peppers - green, red, yellow                | 1 week   | 6-8 months  |  |
| Radishes - red, Diakon                      | 2 weeks  | *   |  |
| Squash, hard                                | *  | 12 months   |  |
| Squash, summer - yellow crookneck, zucchini | 4-5 days   | 12 months   |  |
| Tomatillos                                  | 1 month  | 12 months   |  |
| Tomatoes                                    | 2-3 days   | 12 months   | For best flavor do not refrigerate   |
| Yuca (Cassava)                              | *  | 12 months   |  |
| <b>BAKED PRODUCTS</b>                       |  |   |  |
| <b>Breads</b>                               |  |   | In general, do not refrigerate. Breads stale faster in the refrigerator. However, refrigeration may reduce mold growth if home is hot & humid. |
| Bread, yeast                                | *  | 2-3 months  |  |
| Muffins                                     | *  | 2-4 months  |  |
| Quick breads                                | *  | 2-4 months  |  |
| Pancakes & waffles                          | *  | 2-4 months  |  |
| Rolls, yeast                                | *  | 2-3 months  |  |
| <b>Cakes</b>                                |  |   |  |
| Angel, Chiffon & Sponge                     | *  | 6 months  |  |
| Cheesecake                                  | 7 days   | 4-6 months  |  |
| Fruitcake                                   | *  | 12 months   |  |
| Layer cake                                  | Plain, buttercream icing - not necessary; custard, cream or whipped cream filling or icing - refrigerate | Plain - 3 months<br>Iced - 6 months                           |  |
| <b>Cookies</b>                              |  |   |  |
|   | *  | baked - 6 months, unbaked dough - 4 months                    |  |
| <b>Pies</b>                                 |  |   |  |
| Chiffon & custard                           | 3-4 days   | *   |  |
| Fruit                                       | 1-2 days   | 6-8 months  |  |
| Pumpkin                                     | 3-4 days   | baked 1-2 months  |  |
| Unbaked fruit                               | *  | 4 months  |  |
| Quiche                                      | 3-4 days   | baked 1-2 months  |  |



| Food  | Refrigerator: 35° - 40°F<br>(* = not recommended;<br>NA = not applicable) | Freezer: 0°F<br>(* = not recommended;<br>NA = not applicable) | Notes  |
|---|---|---|--|
| <b>BABY FOOD</b>                            |   |   |  |
| <b>Liquid</b>                               |   |   |  |
| Expressed breast milk                       | 3-5 days  | 5° F - 2 weeks; 0°F 3-6 months; -4° - 6-12 months             | Storage time depends on temperature and conditions. Breast milk has natural antibacterial qualities & may be stored on a counter at 60°-85°F for 3-4 hours. See reference list for more information. |
| Formula                                     | 2 days  | *   |  |
| <b>Solids (open or freshly made)</b>        |   |   |  |
| Strained fruits & vegetables                | 2-3 days  | 6-8 months  |  |
| Strained meat & eggs                        | 1 day   | 1-2 months  |  |
| Strained meat/vegetable combination         | 1-2 days  | 6-8 months  |  |
| Homemade baby foods                         | 1-2 days  | 3-4 months  |  |
| <b>CONDIMENTS</b>                           |   |   |  |
| Ketchup & Barbecue sauce (opened)           | 8-12 months   | *   |  |
| Mayonnaise (commercial, opened)             | 2 months  | *   |  |
| Mustard (opened)                            | 8-12 months   | *   |  |
| Salad dressing - bottled (opened)           | 4 months  | *   |  |
| <b>MISCELLANEOUS</b>                        |   |   |  |
| Chestnuts                                   | 6 months  | *   |  |
| Guacamole                                   | Homemade - 1-3 days;<br>commercial - 5-7 days                             | 6 months  |  |
| Hummus                                      | Homemade - 2-7 days;<br>commercial - 5-7 days                             | *   |  |
| Nuts  | 6+ months   | 1 year  | May store in cool & dry cabinet for 3-4 months. Refrigerate or freeze for longer storage.  |
| Pasta, fresh                                | 1 week  | 1 month   |  |
| Pizza                                       | 3-4 days  | 1-2 months  |  |
| Salads - chicken, turkey, ham, tuna & pasta | 3-5 days  | *   |  |
| Syrups - maple or pancake                   | 6-8 months  | *   |  |
| Tofu  | 1 week  | 5 months  | Store in water in refrigerator & replace water daily.  |

# Foods that do not freeze well

## Because of flavor changes

- Garlic (uncooked)
- Onion (raw; better cooked or as ingredient)
- Salt substitutes (not sodium chloride)
- Spices – clove, sage (flavor is stronger or bitter)
- Vanilla, artificial flavor (not real vanilla)

## Because of texture changes

- Cake icing - soft or boiled (butter cream freezes well)
- Cream sauces
- Custard or cream filling
- Egg whites (cooked) & meringue
- Fried foods (homemade)
- Gelatin
- Mayonnaise or salad dressing
- Lettuce
- Pasta (cooked, unsauced)
- Potatoes

© 2012 Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. All rights reserved.

*For a comprehensive list of our publications visit [www.njaes.rutgers.edu](http://www.njaes.rutgers.edu)*

*June 2012*

*Cooperating Agencies:* Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and County Boards of Chosen Freeholders. Rutgers Cooperative Extension, a unit of the Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, is an equal opportunity program provider and employer.