

Cooling & Freezing Foods

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Q. What are the proper steps to cooling and then freezing hood foods?

A. Putting hot food into the refrigerator will not damage the food nor the refrigerator! If it is a large quantity of food, it will take too long for that food to cool to a safe temperature. In those cases – take some steps to cool foods “slightly” at room temperature before refrigeration.

1. Place the food in a shallow container, on a cooling rack to allow air to circulate all round the pan for 20 to 30 minutes.
2. Stir the food if possible.
3. Limit depth of food to 2 inches.
4. Do not let the cooked food set at room temperature longer than 2 hours!

Complete cooling of foods in the refrigerator. Cool foods to refrigerator temperature before bagging them for your freezer. It is OK to refrigerate foods while they’re still warm. Loosely cover food upon refrigeration. This allows heat to escape and protects the food from accidental contamination from other foods during cooling. Cover foods tightly when they are thoroughly cooled.

If refrigerated perishable foods won’t be eaten in a few days, freeze them. Use “freezer” bags, not “storage” bags for storing food in the freezer. Freezer bags are thicker than storage bags and will keep the food fresh longer.

Speed freezing and hasten thawing by freezing foods in a thinner, flattened shape in freezer bags. A rounded shape takes longer to thaw through to the middle. Flatter packages also will stack better in your freezer.

To avoid mystery meats and other foods of unknown age and possibly origin, label foods using freezer tape, gummed freezer labels or permanent marking pens. Include:

- Name of food;
- Packaging date;
- Number of servings or amount.

It is helpful to place filled freezer bags on a flat surface in your freezer, such as a metal pan. **Do not stack freezer bags until frozen so they will freeze faster.** After they are frozen solid, the bags may be removed from the pan and stored, stacked, directly on the freezer shelf. Or turn them on their edge and store them vertically. This is an especially good idea when freezing liquid foods such as soups and stews.

Q. How do I thaw and cook frozen foods safely?

A. DO NOT thaw perishable foods at room temperature. If perishable foods are left at room temperature too long, bacteria may grow and produce heat-resistant toxins that can cause food-borne illness. Cooking may not be able to destroy these toxins.

It’s best to plan ahead for slow, safe thawing in the refrigerator.

- Small items may thaw overnight in the refrigerator. Up to 5 pounds of food should thaw in about 24 hours.
- If there is the possibility a thawing package might leak, you may want to thaw it on a plate or a pan.
- When reheating previously cooked foods, heat to 165 degrees F (until steamy hot throughout).

Information from Food Reflections Newsletter, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension.

Call me at the Webster County Extension Office, 576-2119 or e-mail pgilbert@iastate.edu, with your nutrition and health questions.
You may also call our toll-free ISU Answerline at 1-800-262-3804