



Store It. Don't Ignore It!

How long and what are the best ways to store foods are common questions among consumers that affect the safety as well as the quality of the foods we consume. Here are some basics for sensible food storage in the refrigerator, freezer and pantry.

In the Refrigerator

Refrigeration is important for slowing pathogenic and spoilage bacteria that can cause foodborne illness or deteriorate the quality of foods. Keep your refrigerator temperature at 40°F or lower to keep food safe. An appliance thermometer can be used to monitor the temperature. Avoid overfilling the refrigerator, since this can keep cold air from circulating.



Raw meat, poultry, and seafood should be kept in a sealed container or wrapped securely to prevent raw juices from contaminating other foods. Some refrigerators have adjustable temperature meat drawer that directs additional cool air into the drawer without freezing. This maximizes the storage time of meats and cheeses.

Refrigerated fruits and vegetables should be stored in perforated plastic bags in a separate produce drawer. Vegetables require higher humidity conditions while fruits require lower humidity. Ethylene gas from fruits can also damage vegetables. Use produce within a few days for freshness and flavor.

Avoid storing perishable foods like eggs and milk on the door because temperature of the storage bins on the door fluctuate more than the temperature in the cabinet. Eggs and milk should be stored in the carton on a shelf. Keeping the door closed as much as possible will help maintain temperature and save energy.



With more efficient refrigerators, warm leftovers can be placed directly in the refrigerator. When thoroughly cooled, cover foods completely to retain moisture and to avoid picking up odors from other foods. Large portions of food, like a pot of stew, can be rapidly chilled in an ice or cold water bath before being divided into smaller portions. Shallow containers are best for cooling foods quickly. For large cuts of meat or whole poultry, divide the item into smaller pieces and wrapped separately before refrigerating.



Once a week, make it a habit to throw out perishable foods that should no longer be eaten. A general rule of thumb for refrigerator storage for cooked leftovers is 4 days; raw poultry and ground meats, 1 to 2 days.

In the Freezer

Most foods, except canned foods, eggs in shells, cream sauce, mayonnaise and lettuce, can be frozen. Freezing keeps food safe **almost** indefinitely but longer storage can affect quality. Freezers should be set at 0°F or below.

Freezing prevents the growth of bacteria, yeasts and molds present in food. However, once thawed, these microbes can become active again and multiply. Freezing also slows enzyme action in animals, vegetables and fruit that can deteriorate food quality. Most vegetables that freeze well are low acid and require blanching and rapid chilling prior to freezing.

Proper packaging is important to retain quality and prevent “freezer burn.” Freezer burn is grayish-brown spots where a food had dried from exposure to air. To maintain quality when freezing meat and poultry in its original package, wrap the package again with foil or plastic wrap that is recommended for the freezer.

Freeze foods quickly for best results. Food two-inches thick should freeze completely in about 2 hours. For quicker freezing, spread foods out on various shelves and stack after frozen solid.

In the Pantry

Shelf stable foods such as canned goods, cereal, baking mixes, pasta, dry beans, mustard and ketchup can be kept safely at room temperature. However, canned foods, mustard and ketchup need to be refrigerated once opened.

Store dry and canned foods in a clean, dry, cool (below 85°F) cabinets away from the stove or the refrigerator's exhaust. Extreme hot (over 100°F) and cold temperatures are harmful to canned goods. In general, most canned foods have a long “shelf life,” and when properly stored, are safe to eat for several years.



Never use food from cans that are leaking, bulging, badly dented, and rusted or with a foul odor; cracked jars or jars with loose or bulging lids; or any container that spurts liquid when you open it. Never taste such foods, discard promptly!

In general, low-acid canned goods can be held for 2 to 5 years (canned meat and poultry, stews, soups except tomato, pasta products, potatoes, corn, carrots, spinach, beans, beets, peas and pumpkin). High-acid canned goods such as tomato products, grapefruit,



pineapple, sauerkraut and foods in vinegar-based sauces or dressings can be stored on the shelf for 12 to 18 months.

In general, food storage charts are guidelines based on food quality. In Hawaii's warmer climates, some foods may spoil faster. The key is to buy foods in reasonable quantities and rotate the products in your refrigerator, freezer and pantry. If in doubt about any item, **DO NOT TASTE IT, THROW IT OUT!**

For more information on the storage life of individual foods in the refrigerator, freezer or pantry, check "The Food Keeper at

<http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/NEW/resources/FoodKeeper.pdf>

For more information on freezing home-prepared foods, go to

<http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/freeze.html>.

Visit our Nutrition Education for Wellness site: <http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/NEW>