

Rewrap meat before storing, freezing

Because meat is perishable, proper care is essential to maintain its keeping qualities.

"Store fresh meat such as steaks and chops loosely covered in the coldest part of your refrigerator or in the meat storage compartment," recommends Marilyn Mook, Michigan State University extension foods specialist. "The refrigerator temperature should be between 36 and 40 degrees F."

If you buy prepackaged fresh meat, loosen the wrapper before putting it in the refrigerator (unless cooking it that day). Slight

surface drying makes the meat last longer. Ham, hot dogs, bacon, bologna, smoked sausage and other cured meats should be stored and refrigerated in their original packages. Try to eat bacon within a week and ham in 3-5 days. Maximum freezer storage for cured meats is two months for best quality.

For a canned ham, follow storage directions on the label. If you buy a canned meat product from the refrigerator or freezer case, don't store it in your cupboard.

FREEZING IS the best way to preserve freshness of meat such as pork and beef. When freezing meat, be sure it's packaged right to protect against drying and freezer burn.

"Freezer burn is an area on the meat's surface that has dried out due to torn wrapping," says Miss Mook. "The meat is safe to eat, but it's dry and doesn't have much flavor."

Take meat out of the store package — it isn't freezer wrap, so it is not suitable for freezer storage longer than two weeks.

Wrap meat in freezer wrap, foil, plastic wrap, saran or plastic bags. Exclude as much air as possible. (It may be difficult to get air out of plastic bags.) The air in your freezer is so cold, it is very dry and

will "pull" moisture from poorly-wrapped meat.

When practical, trim excess fat and remove bone to conserve freezer space. Freeze meat in "family-size" packages.

When wrapping steaks and chops, put only one layer of meat in each package. This makes a flat package that stacks better in your freezer. When taken out of the freezer, the meat will defrost in less time, too.

AS FOR LABELING, try color-coding. Use a different color for labeling each kind of meat. (Such as red for beef, green for pork, blue for lamb.) Then you can tell at a glance what meat is in that small package at the bottom of your freezer. Do all packages.

Your freezer should be at zero degrees or below. Even a 5-degree rise in temperature can affect color, flavor, texture and nutritive value, cautions Sheila Morley, MSU consumer marketing specialist. The quality lost when meat is stored at 25 degrees F. for only one day is greater than from storage for more than a year at zero or colder. And once the quality is lost, it can never be retrieved. Check your freezer and refrigerator with an outdoor thermometer.

Many refrigerator freezing compartments cannot reach or maintain zero degrees F. This is probably true if your freezing unit doesn't have a separate control. In this type compartment, keep frozen foods only a short time.

"DEFROST MEAT in the refrigerator, not on the counter, for maximum quality and safety," warns Miss Mook.

One benefit of this slower thawing is that there's less moisture loss (drip). In fact, meat, fish and poultry can be cooked without thawing; allow about one-third to one-half more cooking time.

When cooking frozen roasts, it is especially important to lower oven temperatures. This helps keep the outside of the roast from becoming dry before the meat in the center is done. Drying should not be a problem, however, if the oven temperature is kept at about 275 degrees F.

Never thaw unwrapped frozen meat by immersing it in warm or hot water. If you do, you will lose any nutrients that are soluble in water.

IT'S SAFEST not to refreeze hamburger. Instead, make chili or spaghetti sauce with it and then freeze," says Miss Mook. "You can refreeze larger pieces of meat such as pork chops, if they still contain ice crystals. But use the meat as soon as possible. There will be some flavor loss."

But don't refreeze a completely-thawed food. Meats cold to the touch with a wholesome odor may safely be cooked immediately and then frozen or served.

Poultry and fish may be refrigerated for two days. Chicken can

be frozen for one year and fish 3-6 months. If stored in the freezer longer than the recommended period, they will be safe to eat, but there is a flavor change and quality loss.

"As for leftover cooked meat, cool, cover tightly and store it in the coldest part of the refrigerator," recommends Miss Mook. "Treat it as carefully as you would any leftover."



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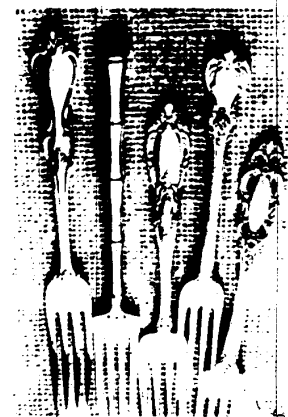
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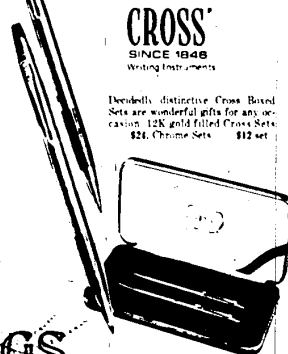
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