

Care and Handling of Meat in Home Freezers

The ingenious American housewife has found hundreds of ways to economize and still provide her family with protein in these days of high meat prices.

Some have even gone so far as to substitute other protein-rich food for higher priced meat cuts or even meat itself.

Substitution, however, is not always a welcome alternative to a family that is used to eating meat regularly, points out the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. Many families have turned to home freezers, particularly in recent months, to be able to buy less expensive meats and other foods in quantity, for use in a wider variety of dishes over a longer period of time.

Freezer storage gives the buyer great flexibility. He or she can buy in quantity or buy when the price is down. By buying in quantity when prices are low, he can double up on savings.

Freezers can be a boon or a bust, depending on how savvy you are in selecting the right freezer, and preparing your food to be frozen properly.

Consumer research publications are a good guide to the selection of a freezer. These magazines are available at most public libraries. Remember, select a freezer that's large enough to quick-freeze your food and keep it cold in the quantity you're likely to use.

Where you put your freezer will have something to do with its ability to keep food cold. Don't locate it next to a hot water heater, the furnace, or where the sun can beat on it during the day. Leave enough space so that air can circulate around it to dissipate any heat radiated from the refrigeration coils.

Limit the amount of food you place in a freezer at any one time to the quantity that can be frozen in 24 hours. This usually will amount to two or three pounds per cubic feet of freezer capacity.

Freezing slowly, above 0 degrees Fahrenheit, impairs the texture and appearance of meats, and they may lose liquids.

Your supplier may wrap and quick-freeze your meat for you. Although the price is certain to be more, this will save you the effort of preparing and wrapping the food for freezing, and you won't have to risk over-loading your freezer during the process.

If your freezer does not have an interior thermometer it's a good idea to buy one. They are inexpensive, and will give you a quick way to check the temperature. You can therefore avoid running your freezer at abnormally low temperatures, using expensive and scarce energy, or keeping it set too high.

Foods selected for freezing should be of good quality and wholesome. If you are really trying to economize, you may want to buy less than the highest

or fanciest quality. Remember, though, no method of storing will improve the quality of meats and poultry. Freezer storage only increases shelf life—not the quality of the product.

Inspect meats and poultry for freezing with care. All meats sold state inspected for wholesomeness. However, meat can become damaged in transit or through bad handling.

U. S. Department of Agriculture grades for beef, veal and lamb are helpful tools to quality. The grading of meat by USDA is purely voluntary at the discretion of the packer.

If you are buying frozen meat for your freezer, make sure it is hard frozen. Don't take soft packages—they may already be deteriorating.

Select your meats just before leaving the store and get them home quickly. Prepare them for the freezer as soon as possible.

Common-sense hygienic practices are good guides to sanitary food preparation. Wear clean clothes . . . wash hands with soap and water thoroughly . . . wash all knives and other utensils. When finished cutting up one package of meat, wash the knives, forks and your cutting surface before starting on another package. This will prevent your cross-contaminating your meat or poultry.

All meat should be wrapped in moisture and vapor proof packaging materials. Aluminum foil is excellent for wrapping irregularly-shaped packages. The objective is to exclude as much air as possible. Air causes oxidation, impairing the appearance, flavor and texture of meats.

Frozen meats can be stored indefinitely, if held at 0 degrees or lower temperatures. Eating quality and nutritive value do change, but very slowly at 0 degrees or below. Rate of change increases rapidly as the temperature rises. The loss of quality in storage is directly related to the temperature and time food is held above zero.

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Your Heart Association urges you to call your doctor immediately if you experience any of the symptoms of heart attack. Delay can cost you your life.

Meats can be cooked with or without thawing. Starting with a frozen piece of meat does not materially affect its taste or texture. But, insert a meat thermometer as soon as the meat is softened enough, so you can check on the internal temperatures to know when it's properly cooked.

When thawing meats for cooking, thaw in the refrigerator at below 40 degrees to prevent bacterial contamination. Remember, all meats contain some bacteria, and become further contaminated during handling. Freezing and cooking meat at the proper temperatures prevents bacterial growth.

If thawing in the refrigerator is

too slow, place the meat in a tightly wrapped water-proof package in cold water or under running cold water.

Follow these household hints and let your freezer help you save money on frozen meats and poultry.

For specific information on the lengths of time various meat and poultry items can be stored in refrigerators and freezers for maintenance of quality, write for a free copy of "Quick Tips" on meat and poultry storage. Address your request to: Information Div., Agricultural Marketing Service, U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, Room 1653, 26 Federal Plaza, New York, NY 10007

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