

**ZAP IT 'N LET'S EAT!
(MICROWAVING FROZEN
CONVENIENCE FOODS)**

I remember, back in the "old days" when I was growing up, the only frozen convenience foods available were frozen pot pies. These made an easy meal for my sister and I to fix by ourselves, but they certainly weren't quick. They took an endless hour to thaw and bake.

Frozen convenience foods certainly have come a long way. With a freezer and a microwave, you can have instant meals or snacks any time of day.

The only problem with frozen convenience foods is that many microwave cookbooks don't give you directions for heating them. The questions that I am asked most frequently in my classes are how to microwave "TV" dinners and convenience foods.

I can't begin to give you directions here for microwaving all the frozen foods available. However, perhaps a few tips on what to watch out for, will help.

General Tips For

Frozen Convenience Foods

— Foods with bottom crusts that are frozen uncooked, will not microwave well. For instance, frozen pot pies and fruit pies; or pizza with a raw crust. The bottom crust just won't cook in the microwave, under the rest of the food.

These foods may be thawed in the microwave on high for 10 to 15 minutes, then baked in a very hot oven (450°F.) for 10 to 25 minutes to bake the crust. You will have to

experiment with the exact times, depending on the type and quantity of food.

— Foods that have to be crispy to be good, such as French fries, will not be crispy when microwaved. Thaw these foods in the microwave on high for 3 to 5 minutes, then put them under the broiler for a few minutes to crisp.

— Most packages give you directions for high power. Many foods will reheat better on a lower power. If your oven has medium power (50,5), heat your foods on medium for twice as long as directed for high power.

Reducing the power level will do two things: The food heats more evenly to the middle, so the center of large pieces won't still be cold. Secondly, it helps prevent the edges of food and the small pieces from getting overcooked (hard or rubbery).

— Several foods can be heated at one time, but may vary in how hot they get because of the consistency of the food. Foods high in moisture, fat, or sugar will heat more quickly than foods low in these. For instance, rice with gravy on it will heat faster than plain rice. Also, denser foods take longer to heat.

— If you stack foods in the oven, the food on the top will heat faster than that on the bottom, because it is closer to the microwaves (for ovens where the microwaves enter from the top). For even heating, switch the position of the food halfway through the heating time.

— Since food near the edges of a container will be hotter than that in the center, let the food stand 3 to 4

minutes to even out.

— Start a small card file. Write down the times for your oven, for those frozen foods that you microwave most often.

Tray Dinners

— Remove cake, pudding and bread products from the trays before microwaving. Defrost these separately using medium low power (30,3, defrost) after the other food is done. If you leave them with the rest of the meal, you'll have rubber for dessert!

— Most tray dinners are now packaged in microwaveable containers. Foods packaged in flat (less than 1-inch high) aluminum trays can be heated right in the metal tray. Keep the tray in the middle of the oven, 1 inch or more away from the walls, so it doesn't arc (spark). Foods in deeper aluminum trays should be placed in a microwave container.

— Cover trays for more even heating. Waxed paper, a paper towel, or even the cardboard box (slide the tray back in the box after removing the foil covering) can be used for covering.

— If the package doesn't have microwave directions, use the

weight of the food to help figure how long to heat. If the package weighs less than 12 or 13 ounces, it will probably take 4 to 7 minutes to heat on high. If the package has over 13 ounces of food, it will probably take 8 to 12 minutes to heat on high.

Vegetables, Side Dishes, Casseroles

— Many of these come in plastic pouches, and can be microwaved right in the pouch. Pierce the plastic with a knife to allow excess steam to escape.

— If the food can be stirred, stirring once after it has thawed will help with even cooking and you can use high power. If the food can't be stirred, like lasagna, medium power (50,5) will give better results (but take twice as long as high).

— When you don't need a whole package of food for one meal and don't want leftovers, wrap the part of the package you don't want to thaw tightly in aluminum foil. (Microwaves cannot penetrate foil so the wrapped part will stay frozen while the unwrapped part thaws.)

Place the package in the center of the oven and microwave for a

short time. As soon as the part that is not wrapped in foil has thawed, cut it off the frozen block. Rewrap the frozen part for the freezer, and continue heating the thawed part.

Desserts, Baked Goods

— These foods need careful handling, because their light texture and high sugar content mean they will thaw rapidly.

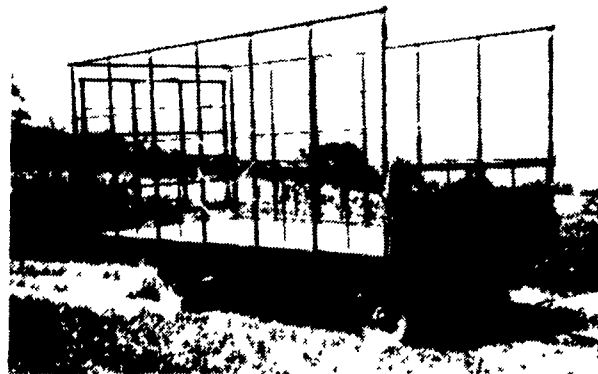
— Remove from packaging and microwave uncovered. Place bread products on a paper towel to absorb extra moisture.

— For food with icing and things like cheesecakes, defrost on medium low power (30,3, defrost) to keep the icing from melting off. Microwave packages under 16 ounces for 2 to 4 minutes on medium low (30,3, defrost). Packages over 16 ounces will take 4 to 6 minutes on medium low. Let stand to finish thawing at room temperature.

— For food without icing, such as bread, pound cakes, donuts, etc. thaw and warm on medium power (50,5). Small packages under 13 ounces will defrost in 1 to 2 minutes on medium. Larger packages over 13 ounces will take 2 to 4 minutes on medium.

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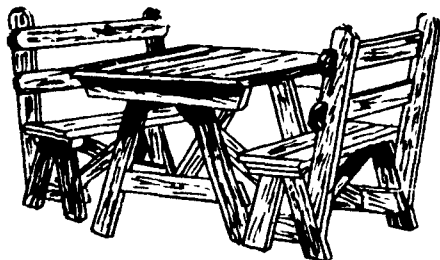


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