

Storage Tips For Sending Food Gifts

COLLEGE PARK, MD — As the holiday season approaches, food catalogs start showing up in mailboxes across America. Everything from smoked salmon to duck pate to chocolate truffles and hazelnut torte are advertised as the perfect Christmas or Hanukkah gift. But are they safe?

"Food items are popular holiday gifts," says Dr. Mark A. Kantor, a food and nutrition specialist with the University of Maryland System Cooperative Extension Service. "And, stored properly, they should present no food safety problems."

Some food gifts, for example, must be refrigerated, and bear a label to that effect.

"If a product is labeled 'Keep Refrigerated,' that's a warning that not all the bacteria have been inhibited or destroyed," Kantor

explains. "Refrigeration is necessary to keep the food safe to eat."

Contrary to popular belief, smoking of meats such as turkey and hams doesn't eliminate the need for refrigeration. These items are smoked for flavor, not preservation.

Country hams are a different story. With their high salt content and dryness, they are safe at room temperature because bacteria can't grow on them.

Other gift foods — canned meats, vacuum-packed steaks, sausage and cheese assortments, for example — may or may not need refrigeration depending on how they were processed.

"Some canned meat products are heated to 250 F, just like veg-

etables and other canned goods," says Robert A. Savage, a food technologist with the Processed Products division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). "This effectively sterilizes them so they are shelf-stable. But some canned hams receive only a mild heat treatment after canning and therefore are not commercially sterile. These hams must be refrigerated (before and after the can is opened)."

Vacuum packaging, while inhibiting the growth of spoilage bacteria, encourages other organisms like Clostridium botulinum that thrive in low-oxygen conditions. (Clostridium botulinum produces a toxin that can cause botulism, a sometimes fatal form of food

poisoning.)

"Vacuum-packed steaks are as perishable as raw chicken and should be treated in the same way," says Savage.

Some sausages and cheeses in gift assortments don't need refrigeration. They are shelf-stable due to brining, drying and, sometimes, preservatives.

To help consumers store meat and dairy gifts safely, USDA has prepared the following chart.

Food Gifts: How to Store Them, How Long They'll Last.

Cans or Jars of Meat - Refrigerate if so labeled; otherwise shelf-stable 2-5 years. After opening, store in refrigerator up to a week.

Cheese, Processed or Hard - Safe at room temperature, but refrigeration prolongs quality. (Soft cheeses, such as brie, must be refrigerated at all times.)

"Cook-Before-Eating" Ham - Refrigerate up to 1 week. After cooking, refrigerate up to 5 days.

Country Ham - Shelf-stable 1 year if unsliced. Refrigerate 2 to 3 months if sliced. Once cooked, refrigerate 5-7 days.

Game Birds - Keep refrigerated up to 2 days raw or 4 days after cooking.

Sausage Labeled "Keep Refrigerated" - Store refrigerated up to 1 week.

Sausage, Hard/Dry - If unopened, can be kept in the cabinet 4-6 weeks, in the refrigerator 6 months. After opening, store up to 3 weeks in the refrigerator.

* **FREEZER NOTE - Frozen food stays safe indefinitely but**

may lose quality and flavor. **WARNING: Don't freeze canned food. Expanding contents may burst can seams, causing leakage and rusting.**

Candy, fruitcakes, plum puddings and other confections seldom pose health problems.

"These products contain sugar, rum, spices and other 'preserving' elements that have been used since the Middle Ages," says Kantor. "They can be shipped and stored at room temperature. About the only thing you need to be concerned with is damage or breakage of the package, especially if it is glass or ceramic."

The one possible health hazard in the dessert category is cheesecake. Because it includes fresh cream cheese, it must be kept cold to avoid spoilage. For this reason, vendors are advised to ship cheesecake frozen solid. Consumers should then refrigerate the cheesecake upon receipt.

If you have questions regarding the safety of food gifts, contact a home economics agent at your local Cooperative Extension Service office. Phone numbers are included in county (and Baltimore city) listings in the blue pages of the telephone directory.

Another source of information is USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline, which operates weekdays 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. EST. Call 1-800-535-4555 (Washington, D.C., area residents should call 202-447-3333).



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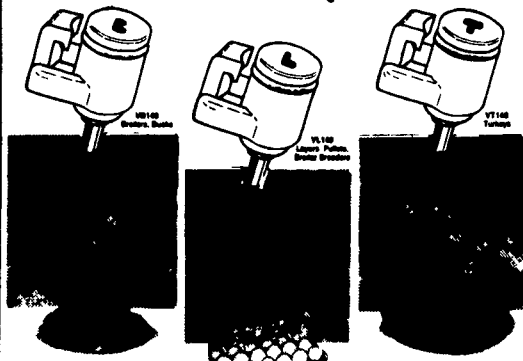


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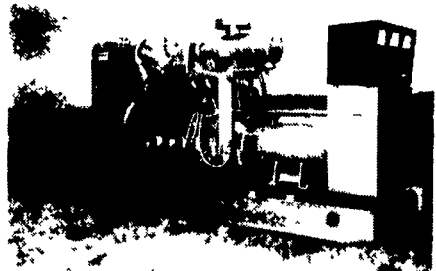
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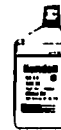
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