

Keeping Food Safe: Proper Storage¹

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the improper storage of food is one of the major food safety risks that is easily preventable. Have you ever wondered if you are storing food properly and safely? Compare your practices to the following guidelines.

When you get home from the store, do you put foods that need to be refrigerated or frozen in the refrigerator or freezer *immediately*? Perishable foods like meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs should be refrigerated within two hours of purchasing or cooking. This is called the “two-hour rule.” When the temperature outside is 90°F or higher, these foods should be refrigerated within 1 hour. Foods should be kept out of the temperature danger zone between 40°F and 140°F. In this zone pathogens grow well. Read on to learn how to properly store food in the refrigerator, freezer, and cupboard!

References

United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service, Safe Food Handling. Kitchen Companion. Accessed January 12, 2011.

1. *Adapted from the United States Department of Agriculture, Kitchen Companion.* This document is FCS80002, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date February 2010. Reviewed July 2015. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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Table 1.

Refrigerator (temperature should be 40° F or below)
<p>Raw meat, poultry, and seafood</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep products in their original packages or wrap them to prevent juices from contaminating other foods. • Place raw meat, poultry, and seafood on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator to prevent juices from contaminating ready-to-eat foods. • If raw meat, poultry, and seafood are not going to be cooked right away, refrigerate them and cook within two days. If you need to store these foods longer than 48 hours, freeze them. <p>Eggs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow the two-hour rule. • Keep eggs in their original carton and place them in the coldest part of the refrigerator. <p>Cooked whole stuffed poultry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow the 2-hour rule. • Put stuffing, gravies, and small pieces of poultry in different shallow containers. <p>Fruits and vegetables</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most fruits and vegetables need to be refrigerated. Store them separately in crisper drawers. • Be sure to refrigerate all sliced, pre-cut, and peeled fruits and vegetables. Follow the two-hour rule. • While fresh-cut produce always needs to be refrigerated for safety, certain whole fruits and vegetables, such as tomatoes and bananas should be kept at room temperature to maintain best flavor. • For additional information on the proper storage of specific fruits and vegetables, refer to these EDIS publications: http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_series_safe_handling_procedures_for_consumers <p>Leftovers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow the two-hour rule. Always cover food to retain moisture and prevent off odors. • Cool hot foods to room temperature before refrigerating them. To safely cool large amounts of food, use shallow containers, or divide the food into small portions. This process will help foods cool more quickly and minimize the time food stays in the temperature danger zone. • Divide soups and stews into small portions in multiple shallow containers before refrigerating them. Use ice water for rapid cooling. Rapid cooling reduces the time foods stay in temperature danger zone. • Divide large cuts of cooked meat into smaller pieces and wrap or put in shallow containers before storing. Always use utensils when handling cooked meats. • Throw leftovers out after 3–4 days!
Freezer (temperature should be 0° F or below)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All foods should be wrapped well to avoid freezer burn. Freezer burn is when the food’s surface dries out, causing dark color. For meats, freezer burn makes them tough because of the loss of moisture. • Write the date (with a permanent marker) on all freezer packages. Move older items forward and store the newer items behind them. • Frozen raw foods that have been thawed in the refrigerator may be refrozen. • Unused portions of frozen cooked foods thawed in the refrigerator may be refrozen.
Cupboard (should be cool, clean, and dry)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check labels for proper storage instructions—some foods need to be refrigerated after opening. • Plan to have enough space for kitchen staples (e.g., rice, flour, sugar, and spices) with a long shelf-life. • Rotate items every time you refill your cupboard, following the FIFO (“first in, first out”) rule. High-acid canned foods, such as tomatoes and juices, can be safely stored for up to 12 months. Low-acid canned foods, such as meat and most vegetables, can be safely stored for 2 to 5 years. • Discard dented, leaking, bulging, or rusted cans.