

How to Store Food

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Learning to store food properly is an essential part of saving money and keeping yourself and your family safe. You can learn to easily distinguish the food items that may be kept out on the counter, items that need to be kept cool, and items that need to be frozen. Stop throwing out food and start storing it properly.

Method 1

Method 1 of 3: Storing Food at Room Temperature



1 Use the FIFO system. "First in, first out," also known as "FIFO," is a common catchphrase used in restaurant kitchens to make sure that the food stays fresh, wherever it is stored. Restaurants go through so much product that every truck delivery usually means that there are only one or two items that have to be rotated forward. For the home cook, this means that canned goods, boxed goods, and other non-perishable supplies should be dated with the date bought. This ensures that a newer item isn't being opened first.^[1]

- Keep your cabinets, your refrigerator, and all your food storage spaces organized to make sure you know where everything is, and what's the most fresh. If you've got three open jars of peanut butter, something's going to spoil.



2 Store produce on the counter if it needs to ripen. Fruit should be left to ripen on the counter, either out in the open or loosely in an open plastic bag to promote ripening. Once fruit has reached its desired level of ripeness, put it into the refrigerator to extend the life of the fruit.

- Bananas produce ethylene, which speeds up the ripening process of other fruits, so you can take advantage of this property and store them in a plastic bag together with a fruit that needs to ripen. This is an excellent technique for avocados as well.
- Never pack fruit into air-tight containers on the counter, or they will quickly spoil. Keep an eye out for signs of bruising or over-ripeness and remove rotten fruit quickly to avoid spoiling the rest.
- Be wary of fruit flies, which are attracted to fruit that's spoiled or in the the process of spoiling. Remnants should always be discarded quickly. If you develop a problem with fruit flies, start storing your fruit in the fridge.



3 Store rice and other grains in sealed containers. Rice, oatmeal, quinoa, and other dry grains can be kept in your kitchen cabinets in tight, sealed containers. Glass jars, plastic tupperware containers, and any other lidded storage is perfect for storing these bulk items in cabinets or on the counter. This goes for dried beans as well.[2]

- If you store rice and other grains in plastic bags, be wary of meal worms. These can be perfectly fine ways of storing rice, but small holes can allow meal worms and moths to breed, ruining large amounts of food. It's always best to keep them in tightly sealed jars.



4 Store root vegetables in paper bags. If it grows under the ground, it doesn't need to go into the refrigerator. Potatoes, onions, and garlic should be kept in cool, dark, and dry places, not in the refrigerator. If you want to keep them in anything, a loose paper bag is perfectly fine.[3]



5 Store fresh bread in paper bags on the counter. If you've purchased some freshly baked, crusty bread, keep it in a paper bag out on the counter to keep it as fresh as possible. Bread on the counter, properly stored, should be good for 3-5 days, which extends to 7-14 days in the refrigerator.^[4]

- It's also fine to refrigerate or freeze bread, especially soft sandwich bread, to extend the life. If you live in a particularly humid place, soft breads will mold very quickly if left out, and bread is easy to defrost in the toaster.
- If you keep bread on the counter, never keep it in a plastic bag. This promotes mold.

Method 2 of 3: Refrigerating Food



1 Keep your refrigerator set at the optimum temperature. Refrigerators should be set at or below 40 °F (4.4 °C). The food temperature danger zone, the temperature range where bacteria thrive, is between 41 F and 140 F. Any food that is left out in these temperatures is susceptible bacteria growth which could lead to food-borne illness. Always get cooked food put away as soon as possible.^[5]

- Check the temperature of your refrigerator regularly. The temperature can fluctuate depending on how much food is in your fridge, so it's a good idea to keep an eye on it if you're sometimes full up and sometimes running low.



2 Keep food refrigerated if it's already cold. Some food items can be stored on the counter sometimes and should be kept in the refrigerator at other times. Where do you store bottled beer? Pickles? Peanut butter? Soy sauce? Rule of thumb: If you buy something cold, it needs to stay in the refrigerator.[6]

- Items like pickles, peanut butter, and soy sauce are fine to keep in the cabinet at room temperature until you open them, at which point they'll need to be refrigerated. Oil or vinegar-based items usually work this way.
- Refrigerate canned foods after opening. Anything, whether it be cooked ravioli or green beans, will need to be refrigerated after you open the can. You can store it in the can itself, or transfer it to a tight-lidded storage container for a closer seal.



3 Let leftovers cool before refrigerating. Leftovers should be stored in covered containers, either with lids or loosely with plastic cling wrap or tin foil. The looser, the more likely the food is to stink up the fridge or take on other smells, but it's a perfectly fine way of keeping leftovers, once they've cooled to room temperature.^[7]

- After food is cooked, transfer it to a larger shallow container instead of a smaller deeper container for storage. The larger container will ensure uniform cooling over a shorter period of time.
- Meat and food items that contain meat need to be cooled to room temperature before putting it in the refrigerator. If you place hot meat in a covered container and then immediately into the fridge, the condensation will make the meat spoil much more quickly than normal.



4 Store meat properly. Consume or freeze all cooked meat within 5-7 days. If you can't get through your leftovers fast enough, consider freezing what's left and defrosting it at a leaner time, when there's less in the fridge.^[8]

- Raw meat always needs to be refrigerated, kept separate from cooked meat and other products, by wrapping it loosely in plastic wrap in the refrigerator. Watch closely for signs of spoilage. Spoiled meat will turn slightly gray or brown and give off an unpleasant odor.



5 Refrigerate store-bought eggs. Eggs that you buy at the store are sometimes quite old, and should be kept in the refrigerator until they've been used. Keep a close eye on them for signs of spoilage after cracking them, always making sure to crack them into a bowl instead of breaking them into the food you're making.

- Recently laid eggs that have not been washed are perfectly safe to keep on the counter. If you've purchased eggs at the farmer's market recently, ask if they've been washed and for guidance about proper storage of the eggs.



6 Store cut vegetables in the refrigerator. Leafy greens, tomatoes, fruits, and other vegetables should be kept in the refrigerator once you've cut into them. To ensure they stay fresh for as long as possible, wash and dry them thoroughly, then pack them in the fridge in a sealed plastic container with a tea or paper towel to absorb excess moisture.

- Keep tomatoes out of the fridge unless they have been sliced. In the fridge, their insides turn watery and it shortens their shelf life. Sliced tomatoes can be stored in the fridge in a plastic container.

Method 3 of 3: Freezing Food



1 Freeze food in tightly sealed plastic freezer bags. Whatever item you're going to store in the freezer, the best way to keep it protected is tightly-locking freezer bags that have had all the air squeezed out of them. To prevent "freezer burn," which occurs when items become both frozen and dried out, freezer bags are the safest and simplest method.

- Plastic tubs or tupperware containers are also effective at storing some kinds of food more effectively. Especially juicy berries or cooked meat can sometimes be less desirable to store in bags, as well as soup and other things that would be difficult to defrost.



2 Freeze food in appropriate portions. To use the food after freezing it, you'll have to defrost it in the refrigerator. For this reason, it's usually good to freeze food in portions that you'll use. So, don't freeze that entire salmon, freeze a single dinner-sized portion at a time, so you'll have what you need when you need it.^[9]



3 Date and label everything. Is that last summer's blackberries or some venison from 1994 at the back of your freezer? When things get iced-up, it can start getting hard to tell the difference. To avoid the headache of positively identifying everything, try to label and date everything that you put into the freezer, so you'll be able to recognize it quickly and easily.^[10]



4 Freeze raw or cooked meat for 6-12 months. Meat should stay fine in the freezer for up to six months, but will start drying out and becoming less palatable beyond that. It's safe to eat, still, since it's frozen, but the flavor will start to taste more and more like the freezer and less and less like the food that went into it.^[11]



5 Blanch vegetables before freezing. It's usually recommended that vegetables should be cooked before freezing them, rather than cutting them up and freezing them raw. It's more difficult to return vegetables to their natural, unfrozen state. Frozen vegetables are easy to throw right into soups, stews, and stir-frys, making it an excellent way of managing leftover produce items.

- To blanch vegetables, cut them into bite-sized pieces and dip quickly into salted boiling water. No more than a minute or two, and immediately take them from the boiling water into a waiting bath of icy water to shock them and stop them from cooking. They should still be firm, but partially cooked.
- Place portion-sized amounts of vegetables into freezer bags and label and date them. Allow the vegetables to cool completely before freezing.



6 Put the fruit into the freezer that you want to take out. How to freeze fruit depends partially on what you'll be doing with them. If you've got a bunch of berries to make pies with, go ahead and sugar them to create the filling before you freeze them up, so it'll be much easier later. If you're freezing peaches, you might want to remove the skins before you put them in the freezer, because it'll be too difficult to take them off later.

- Generally, you want to cut most fruits into bite-sized pieces before freezing, to promote more even freezing. You could put a whole apple into the freezer, but it'll be hard to do anything with it later.



Expert Q&A

Question

What is the best food storage container?



Kathryn Kellogg
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Expert Answer

Opt for reusable containers over single-use boxes or bags to help reduce waste. There are tons of great reusable options for storing food. Unless you're traveling, I recommend keeping your food in a glass container like a mason jar or a glass bowl, because if you can see what's inside you'll be more likely to eat it. I also like mixing bowls with lids, because you can prepare the food in the mixing bowl, then you can just put on the lid and store it in the fridge, and you'll have less dishes to wash.

Helpful 1 Not Helpful 0

Question

Is it good or healthy to overfill your fridge?



Community Answer

It depends: Having an over-filled fridge might mean that it's harder to find things you need and harder to recognize how long things have been in there. Also, you don't want to buy more food than you need. But if you have a larger family and that's just the amount of food you need, that's perfectly fine, too.

Helpful 0 Not Helpful 0



Tips

- Ensure adequate space in the fridge for good air circulation.
- Use up older stock first.
- Mushrooms should be kept in paper bags in the fridge. Plastic bags cause them to go mushy.
- Once you have opened a package, store the unused portion of tofu in a container of water with a tight lid. Change the water daily. The tofu should be consumed in three days.



Warnings

- Avoid storing food in cabinets above the stove as the heat will cause them to spoil faster.

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About This Article



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This article was co-authored by **Kathryn Kellogg**. Kathryn Kellogg is the founder of goingzerowaste.com, a lifestyle website dedicated to breaking eco-friendly living down into a simple step-by-step process with lots of positivity and love. She's the author of 101 Ways to Go Zero Waste and spokesperson for plastic-free living for National Geographic. This article has been viewed 44,248 times.

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