# Freezer Fundamentals

## Freezer Fundamentals

***Twenty-seven tips for wrapping, storing, and thawing all the foods you freeze.***

## How to Freeze

Don’t view the freezer as an intermediary between the stove and the trash can. It sounds obvious, but freeze only the foods you liked before they were frozen. There are many things you can do to keep soups and casseroles tasting almost as good as they were when they went into the freezer, but no food is going to taste better after it’s been frozen and thawed.

**Use the right gear.** Use containers and wraps designed for the freezer; they are thick enough to keep moisture in and freezer odours out. Thinner sandwich bags and regular kitchen wrap?even when doubled up?are not durable enough to withstand the big chill. If you are going to freeze anything long-term in glass, make sure the glass is either tempered (the type used for canning jars) or specifically labelled for freezing. Since even freezer-safe glass can crack as food expands, always make sure to leave about 3/4 inch of space between the top of the food and the lid. Freeze in small portions. Whenever possible, pack food in small containers. Large portions in large containers freeze more slowly. The faster food freezes, the fresher it will taste when it’s thawed.

**Slice before you freeze.** Slice bread and halve bagels before freezing for easy one-person servings. Slip bagel halves into the freezer bag back-to-back so they’re less likely to stick together.

**Squeeze out excess air.** Where there’s excess air, there’s

freezer burn. When you're storing items such as sliced bread in a bag, squeeze out as much air as possible before sealing. When you're storing sauces, soups, or stews in containers, however, leave a bit of space at the top of the container to prevent the liquid, which expands, from freezing to the lid.

**Stash strategically.** Wait for hot foods to cool down to room temperature before you freeze them. Then leave plenty of space around the container in the freezer so the cold air can circulate around it; this will accelerate the freezing. When the item is finally frozen, go ahead and stack it with everything else.

## What to Freeze

Your freezer is not just a place to store chilli and Chunky Monkey. Think of it more as the arctic extension of your pantry: a place to store staples?and even some specialty items?that will make your cooking more efficient and more enjoyable.

**Berries:** Spread berries (or any other small, squishable item, such as hors d'oeuvres, meatballs, drop cookies, and leftover cooked ravioli and tortellini) out on a baking sheet and freeze until solid, then transfer them to a resealable plastic bag. This method will prevent them from clumping together.

**Flavour cubes:** Use ice-cube trays to freeze leftover broth, orange juice, or milk. Freeze portions of pesto, tomato paste, coffee, tea, or wine (for cooking, not drinking). Once solid, the cubes can be transferred to a resealable freezer bag for safekeeping.

**Casseroles:** Don't hold the casserole dish hostage in the freezer while you wait to use its contents. Instead, line a casserole with foil, assemble the uncooked food in it, wrap, freeze until solid, then lift out the foil and the contents. Transfer the block to a freezer bag until you're ready to thaw

and cook.

**Eggs:** You can freeze eggs as long as they are out of the shell and beaten. Stash yolks and whites separately in resealable plastic bags. (If you're freezing only yolks, beat each with about a teaspoon of sugar first to keep them fresh.) Thaw under hot running water or in the refrigerator overnight.

**Leftover pancakes and waffles:** Let them cool, separate with wax paper to prevent sticking, then freeze in resealable plastic bags. To reheat, don't thaw?just pop them in the toaster oven.

**Cakes:** To preserve frosted cake (a whole cake or a piece), place it in the freezer uncovered until the frosting is firm (about two hours, depending on the frosting), then wrap in plastic, then foil. To thaw, unwrap the foil and the plastic, then reshape the foil so it creates a tent over the cake. Thaw in the refrigerator overnight. Let the cake come to room temperature before serving.

**Nuts:** They contain oils that can turn rancid if you keep them in a pantry.

**Firm cheeses:** Grate cheeses such as Parmesan, Romano, and aged provolone, and store in a resealable plastic bag.

**Fruit:** Freeze cubed melon, peaches, mangoes, watermelon, and bananas that are in danger of becoming overripe, and use them to make smoothies or frozen margaritas.

## How to Thaw

The flavour and texture of foods you've kept in the freezer can depend on how the foods are defrosted. Slow thawing in the refrigerator is the gentlest method, resulting in the least change in texture and taste. If you can't wait overnight (or several days for a large piece of meat), there are alternatives.

**Thaw safely.** Meat, fish, poultry, eggs, and dairy foods should never get warmer than 40° F until they are cooked. If you need to thaw them quickly, your best bet is to dunk the bag in cold water. Meat should be completely immersed?you don't want any part exposed to warm air. If you defrost meat in a microwave, cook it immediately afterward. Since most meats vary in shape and thickness, they can defrost unevenly and become warm in parts before they thaw through.

**Freeze and tenderize.** Freeze marinated meats in a resealable plastic bag, then defrost in the refrigerator overnight. The meat will soak up the marinade as it thaws. This is great for tough cuts, which will tenderize in the freezer as well. The method will also prevent freezer burn on the meat, because the liquid "wrap" prevents air from affecting the meat's surface.

**Enlist the microwave.** Use the defrost setting (or 30 percent power) to thaw foods slowly in the microwave. Microwave frozen foods partially covered, and check them every few minutes. Stir whenever possible to ensure even thawing, or turn over and reposition pieces of meat or fish. Remove them from the microwave as soon as they are thawed (they should be flexible and soft but not warm). Always cook thawed foods immediately.

**Freeze flat for a quick thaw.** The greater the surface area, the faster the thaw, so use shallow, flat containers. Freeze broths, sauces, and other liquids flat in freezer bags, then stand them up sideways for storage. When you remove them and submerge them in a bowl of hot water (or hold them under hot running water), they'll thaw quickly.

**Think portion control.** Freeze soups, spaghetti sauce, and lasagne in one- and two-portion containers, which thaw more quickly and guarantee you won't have to thaw more than you need.

**Refreeze thawed foods.** The flavour may suffer slightly, but you can put defrosted cooked meat, fish, and poultry back into

the freezer as long as they thawed in the refrigerator and never got warmer than 40°

## An Organized Freezer

If the freezer is deep, post a list outside of what's inside. Record the date each item was stored. Use a magnetic pad or an erasable message board.

- Use square Tupperware whenever possible. Square containers can be stacked and positioned in corners and don't take up as much space as round containers.
- Stack similar foods together. If you have a side-by-side refrigerator-freezer, designate one shelf for meat, one for baked goods, and one for vegetables.
- Edit the contents of your freezer periodically. Reorganize so the oldest items are always in front and are therefore used first.

## What is Freezer Burn?

Freezer burn occurs when air dries out the surface of foods, toughening the texture and worsening flavours. The burn is easy to identify (it's frosty and gray), and it can be prevented by wrapping foods in airtight freezer-designed packages. (Be sure to keep the freezer door open only as briefly as possible. Too much exposure to warm air can cause temperature fluctuations, which invite freezer burn.) If your ice crystal-scorched food hasn't been in the freezer longer than the recommended storing time, cut off the offending area as it thaws and cook as planned. Keep in mind: There's nothing unsafe about freezer burn. It might not taste good, but it's not going to make anyone sick.

## How Long Can You Freeze Food For?

**Cooked**

- Beef: 2 to 3 months
- Breads and cakes: 3 months
- Casseroles: 3 months
- Chicken pieces: 4 months
- Hard sausage (pepperoni): 1 to 2 months
- Vegetable or meat soups and stews: 2 to 3 months
- **Raw**

- Bacon: 1 month
- Chicken pieces: 9 months
- Ground meat: 3 to 4 months
- Hot dogs: 1 to 2 months
- Pork chops: 4 to 6 months
- Sausage (pork, turkey, or beef): 1 to 2 months
- Steaks: 4 to 12 months
- Whole chicken: 1 year
- ***Your freezer isn't just for quarts of soup or pizzas. Try freezing these surprising items (in airtight bags or containers) to extend their shelf life.***
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- **You Can Freeze That?**

- **Chicken broth,** three months
- **Coconut (grated),** two months
- **Gingerroot,** two months
- **Hard cheeses** (such as Parmesan, Romano, Cheddar, and Swiss), six months
- **Milk,** one month (Freeze the carton upright.)
- **Nuts,** two months
- **Pancakes and waffles,** one month (Reheat these straight from the freezer.)
- **Rice** (cooked and frozen in small portions), one month
- **Tomato paste,** three months
- **Unsalted butter,** six months

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