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HEG81-143 Meat Storage Guidelines

H. Dwight Loveday

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Sheri Horn

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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Meat Storage Guidelines

Because meat is a highly perishable food item, extra care and attention are needed to ensure that a high quality, wholesome product is served.

H. Dwight Loveday, Extension Meat Specialist
Sheri Horn, Student Assistant, Animal Science

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Because meat is a highly perishable food item, extra care and attention are needed to ensure that a high quality, wholesome product is served. Unwholesomeness and spoilage of meat are caused by bacteria and other microorganisms. This contamination generally occurs during cutting and processing. These bacteria require three conditions for growth:

1. low acidity (near neutral pH) level within the meat;
2. an available supply of water or other moisture, such as meat juices;
3. a warm temperature -- generally between 45° and 127°F.

Therefore, to prevent spoilage and the possibility of food borne illness, precautions must be taken to control these three factors.

The safety measures taken vary depending on the form or type of meat product. Five basic types of meat exist, each of which require special storage techniques. They are fresh, cooked, cured, canned and frozen meat.

Fresh Meat

Keep fresh meats refrigerated at temperatures of 38° to 40°F for as much time as possible. It is best to select fresh meat items last when shopping.

Once home, store fresh meats in the coldest part of the refrigerator. Use a thermometer to locate the best

spot. Leave the meat in its original wrapping if it is to be used within two days. For longer storage, rewrap the meat in freezer wrap or foil and freeze. Refrigerator storage times are given in *Table I*.

It is important to allow free circulation of cold air around meat products. An airy, uncluttered refrigerator will keep all foods fresh longer. In addition, meat should never be washed prior to storage or use as the added moisture enhances the chance for bacterial growth.

Cooked Meat

Cool cooked meats as rapidly as possible to minimize the time spent in the "warm" temperature range which is optimum for bacterial growth. This can be done by providing plenty of air circulation around the meat, or by placing the meat in a pot or bowl and immersing this in cold water. To avoid potential food poisoning hazards, do not hold meat at a "warm" temperature (40° to 140°F) for longer than one hour.

Refrigerating cooked meats before they are properly cooled results in condensation, providing the extra moisture needed for bacterial growth. Furthermore, hot items raise the temperature within the refrigerator, thus leading to spoilage of other foods. Once it has cooled, cover or wrap meat and refrigerate it. Airtight packaging will prevent surface dehydration and odor uptake.

All cooked meats should be used within a week of the initial preparation, or properly wrapped and frozen for later use.

Cured Meat

Cured, smoked, and ready-to-eat meats include ham, bacon, smoked pork and sausage products. The heat, smoking and processing of these items inactivates most bacteria and enzymes. Leave these products in their original wrapping to prevent further contamination. Once opened, most cured meat products will stay fresh under refrigeration for approximately a week and should be stored in airtight containers to prevent drying out of the meat and odors in the refrigerator. Do not freeze luncheon meats.

Canned Meats

Canned meats come in two varieties--those that require refrigeration, such as hams, and those that do not, such as chili con carne, corned beef and dried meats. The best rule to follow for storage is to read the can label carefully and follow all instructions.

Most canned meats that do not require refrigeration have a relatively long shelf life. Canned meats should never be frozen.

Frozen Meat

Meat can be stored for longer periods of time if frozen at -10°F or below. After the meat is frozen, maintain the temperature at 0°F or lower. Most chest-type and side-by-side freezers are able to maintain this temperature while most ice compartments in refrigerators do not. Therefore, it is not recommended to store meat in the ice compartment.

Limit freezer storage time on all meats to maintain their optimum quality and freshness. Freezing meat will not improve its quality, but will retain its natural color, flavor, texture and nutritional value.

Thaw frozen meats slowly in the refrigerator, allowing approximately 3 to 7 hours per pound depending on the size and thickness of the cut. Microwave ovens can also be used to defrost meat. Frozen meat need not be thawed before preparation, but cooking time will increase by 15 to 20 minutes per pound.

Refreezing of meats is generally not recommended although it is not harmful. Refreezing meat may result in lower quality and the loss of some of its natural juices. Partially thawed meats, with ice crystals still evident, can be refrozen without a major loss of quality.

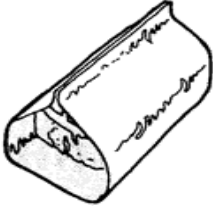
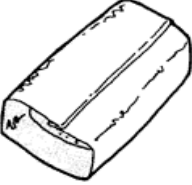

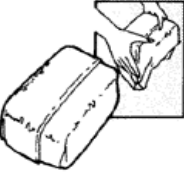
How to Freeze Meat

The first step in successful freezing is in choosing a high quality product. Freezer storage will not improve meats' quality so it is advisable to choose cuts that are brightly colored, well marbled and fresh.

Before wrapping, trim away excess fat and bone to make a smaller package that is less likely to tear. Select a "trapping material that is air and moisture proof, such as a freezer type paper, aluminum foil, plastic wrap or airtight casserole dishes. Wrap only the amount needed per meal to help cut down leftovers. Place waxed paper between chops, steaks and patties so they can be separated while still frozen. *Figure 1* illustrates the paper meat wrapping method.

Figure 1. Wrapping instructions.

Use an air and moisture proof wrapping material, such as freezer paper, aluminum foil or plastic wrap.

	Place meat in center of wrapping material. With several cuts, place an interleaf of waxed paper between cuts for easier separation. Large cuts may need to be divided for easier thawing and preparation.
	Bring the edges of the wrap together and fold at least twice.
	Smooth the wrapping material against the meat to force air out. Smooth the ends of the wrap and fold them into triangles. Ends may be double folded toward the package to seal out air.
	Fold the ends <i>under</i> the package and seal with freezer tape. Label each package with the name of the cut, date and number of servings or weight.

The last but most important step is to label all packages with the contents, weight and/or number of servings and date. This will help in the use of a "first-in, first-out" system.

Freeze and store meat at 0°F or lower. The length of storage for maximum freshness is given in *Table I*. Products may be stored longer than the recommended times, but quality will progressively lessen with time.

Table I. Maximum storage recommendations for fresh, cooked and processed meats.

Meat	Refrigerator*	Freezer**
Beef (fresh)	2 to 4 days	6 to 12 months
Veal (fresh)	2 to 4 days	6 to 9 months
Pork (fresh)	2 to 4 days	3 to 6 months
Lamb (fresh)	2 to 4 days	6 to 9 months
Ground beef, veal, and lamb	1 to 2 days	3 to 4 months
Ground pork	1 to 2 days	1 to 3 months
Variety meats	1 to 2 days	3 to 4 months
Luncheon meats	1 week	Not recommended
Sausage, fresh pork	1 week	60 days
Frankfurters	4 to 5 days	1 month
Bacon	5 to 7 days	1 month
Smoked ham, whole	1 week	60 days
Ham slices	3 to 4 days	60 days
Beef, corned	1 week	2 weeks
Leftover cooked meat	1 week	2 to 3 months
Sausage, smoked	3 to 7 days	
Sausage, dry & semi-dry (unsliced)	2 to 3 weeks	
Meat pies (cooked)		3 months
Swiss steak (cooked)		3 months
Stews (cooked)		3 to 4 months
Prepared meat dinners		2 to 6 months
* 36 to 40°F ** 0°F or lower		

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