

Daily Union – Saturday, December 20, 2014  
Vol. 2 Issue 50: Enjoying Holiday Favorites Longer

Many of us have family celebrations where everyone is asked to bring something for the meal. We have our favorite dishes that each person contributes, and sometimes are expected to bring our own specialty as well. I always looked forward to my dad's homemade stuffing and I have since become well-known in my family for the baked ham I get requests to make.

With such a high value placed on these seasonal favorites, I wanted to share some shopping and storing tips that would help you keep the food safe and savory. The amount of time a food can be safely stored as a leftover is dependent in part on how it was handled prior to preparation.

First, consider how the food should be handled before you share it with your family. Foods can be classified into 3 groups: perishable foods, semi-perishable foods, and staples or non-perishable foods.

Perishable foods include meat, poultry, fish, milk, eggs and many raw fruits and vegetables. All cooked foods fall into this category. To store these foods for any length of time, you need to place them in a refrigerator that is set at 40°F or lower or a freezer that is set at 0°F or lower. If temperatures are higher in either one of these appliances, you limit the amount of time foods will maintain good quality during storage.

Semi-perishable foods, when handled and stored correctly, can last up to six months to a year. These foods, which include flour, grain products, dried fruits, and dry-mixes will last longer if stored in a cool dark place at a temperature of 50-70°. A pantry or kitchen cupboard typically works. Temperatures above 100°F will cause canned foods and other semi-perishable foods to deteriorate and lose quality. For this reason, don't use a cabinet close to a heat source to store semi-perishable foods.

Staple foods are non-perishable foods such as sugar, dried beans, and canned goods. If handled appropriately, these foods will not spoil. However, even under ideal conditions, these products will lose quality over time.

As you head to the store, create a shopping list that has the items listed in the above 3 categories. Make sure you buy the staple products first, followed by the semi-perishable and finally, the perishable foods. This will reduce the amount of time those foods that need refrigerator or freezer storage will be subjected to warmer temperatures. Avoid dusty cans or torn labels as that can be an indication that the product has been on the shelf for a prolonged amount of time. Don't buy dented or bulging cans as their seals have likely been compromised and you cannot be assured that they are safe to eat.

When you get home, label items with the purchase date and rotate your foods so that the ones that have been in storage the longest are used first. In food safety terms, this is called the “first in, first out” rule.

To help you enjoy your family favorite leftovers, follow these helpful guidelines for safe food storage:

<b>FOOD</b>	<b>REFRIDGERATOR</b> 32°F - 40°F	<b>FREEZER STORAGE</b> At 0°F	<b>HANDLING HINTS</b>
Baked quick breads		2 months	Wrap in plastic or storage in plastic freezer storage bag
Pumpkin pie	2 – 3 days	1 – 2 months	
Fruit cakes		6 – 12 months	
Dips			Keep tightly covered
- Commercial	2 weeks		Keep tightly covered
- Homemade	2 days		
Whipped topping			Keep covered
- In aerosol can	3 months		*May be refrozen four or five times if thawed in refrigerator
- Prepared from mix	3 days		
- Commercial*	2 – 3 weeks	14 months	
Fresh vegetables			*store in moisture-resistant wrap
- broccoli	3 – 5 days	8 – 12 months	
- celery	1 week	8 – 12 months	
- lettuce* (head, unwashed)	5 – 7 days	n/a	**do not wash before storing
- lettuce* (shredded)	1 – 2 days	n/a	
- mushrooms**	1 – 2 days	8 – 12 months	
- peppers	1 week	8 – 12 months	
Fresh fruits			*discard bruised or decayed fruit – don't wash before storing because moisture encourages spoilage
- Apples*	1 month	8 – 12 months	**refrigerate only when full ripe as skin will darken
- Bananas**	See handling hints	n/a	
- Kiwis	6 – 8 days	4 – 6 months	
- Pineapples	5 – 7 days	4 – 6 months	
- Plantains	Ripen at room temp.	8 – 12 months	
Cooked meat and meat dishes	3 – 4 days	2 – 3 months	Keep covered
Cooked poultry dishes	3 – 4 days	4 months	
Ham,			
- fully cooked, whole	7 days	1 – 2 months	
- fully cooked, sliced	3 – 4 days	1 – 2 months	
Casseroles	1 – 2 days	1 month	
Soups, stews	2 – 3 days	4 – 6 months	

This season, enjoy your favorite food traditions and keep your family safe from illness. Food needs to be stored within 2 hours of serving. It is not necessary to let the food fully cool before you put it away. It is important, however, that you transfer large quantities into smaller, shallow containers to ensure they chill or freeze as quickly as possible.

Using these guidelines is the best place to start, but you still need to use common sense. The rule of thumb in my house is "When in doubt, throw it out!"

If you want a more comprehensive list of food storage recommendations or have other questions about safe food preparation and handling, you can contact me here at the Geary County Extension office 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!