

6 Myths About Freezing Food

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Myth 1: You can freeze all foods.

While it's true most edibles freeze under the right conditions, there are some that should never see the inside of your freezer. Delicate vegetables like lettuce practically disintegrate when they're frozen then thawed. Creamy sauces that are frozen separate and "break" or curdle when thawed. Even coffee shouldn't be stored in the freezer—especially dark roasts. The oils that make them so special break down in freezing temperatures, allowing the coffee to readily absorb off- flavors. The USDA also advises not to freeze canned goods or eggs in their shell. (But you can freeze canned goods if they are removed from their original packaging, as well as eggs as long as they are removed from their shell.)

Myth 2: You can freeze food indefinitely.

This is true at least from a food-safety standpoint, but quality suffers the longer food is frozen. Here are some guidelines from the USDA as to how long to keep food in your freezer (at 0 degrees F) for optimal freshness:

Soups, stews and casseroles: 2-3 months

Cooked meat 2-3 months

Uncooked steaks, roasts or chops: 4-12 months

Cooked poultry: 4 months

Uncooked poultry: 9-12 months

Of course how you store the item will lengthen or shorten its freezer life. Air coupled with moisture is the enemy of frozen food (think freezer burn), so if you can keep those two elements out you'll give your frozen foods a longer life. That's why I love the vacuum sealer. It sucks air out of the packaging so foods last longer than if they're just stored in plastic bags or their original packaging.

Myth 3: Freezing kills bacteria.

Freezing foods renders bacteria inactive but doesn't actually kill anything. That means if your food went into the freezer contaminated, once thawed it will still harbor the same harmful bacteria. Cooking it to the recommended temperature is the only way to ensure that your food is safe.

Myth 4: Frozen food has fewer nutrients than fresh.

Actually, the opposite can be true. Frozen fruits and vegetables may be even more healthful than some of the fresh produce sold in supermarkets because they tend to be processed at their peak ripeness, a time when, as a general rule, they are most nutrient-packed. If you're worried about nutrient loss, eat your frozen fruits and veggies soon after purchase: over many months, nutrients in frozen vegetables do inevitably degrade. Finally, steam or microwave rather than boil your produce to minimize the loss of water-soluble vitamins.

Myth 5: Once thawed, food cannot be refrozen without cooking it first.

You can freeze and refreeze to your hearts content as long as the food has not been left outside the fridge for more than 2 hours (or 1 hour in 90-degree heat). One point to be aware of is that refreezing anything uncooked, especially meat,

will degrade the quality due to the loss of moisture in the thawing process. So although it is *technically* safe to eat, from a culinary standpoint, it's best to avoid refreezing if at all possible.

Myth 6: You can store frozen food long-term anywhere in your freezer or anywhere that's cold.

The door of the freezer is a handy place to store frozen items, but not necessarily the best place for long-term storage. The temperature near and on the door fluctuates every time the door is opened. Although the food may remain frozen, the freezing process could be slowed, opening up the possibility for larger ice crystals to form inside the food and destroy its integrity. To prevent this, store frozen foods toward the back of the freezer where a constant 0 degrees F is more likely to be achieved and use goods stored near the front or on the door sooner. And if the power goes out? Don't open the freezer door! According to the USDA, a full freezer should remain frozen for 2 days. And if you're tempted to store your freezer overflow in a snowbank—don't. Even if the temperature is very cold, the sun can still heat up your frozen foods to dangerously warm temperatures. This is still an excellent way to store beer, though. So keep doing that.