



Freezing Poultry for Home Use

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Freezing is one tool that everyone can use to stretch their food dollars. Purchasing fresh poultry in large packages and freezing it in quantities suitable for individual meals can reduce the amount of time spent on shopping and meal preparation.

Families can also process their own poultry for home freezing (See B-1383, Processing Poultry at Home). When properly prepared, packaged and frozen, turkey and chicken held at 0° F should be good for 12 months. Poultry stored at 10° F will remain in good condition for 6 months, and turkey and chicken held at 20° F will have a shelf life of 3 months.

When used properly, the guidelines in this publication will help you to freeze and serve high-quality, tasty, economical food. Information is presented in terms of turkey and chicken, but also applies to other types of poultry such as duck, guinea, quail and pheasant.

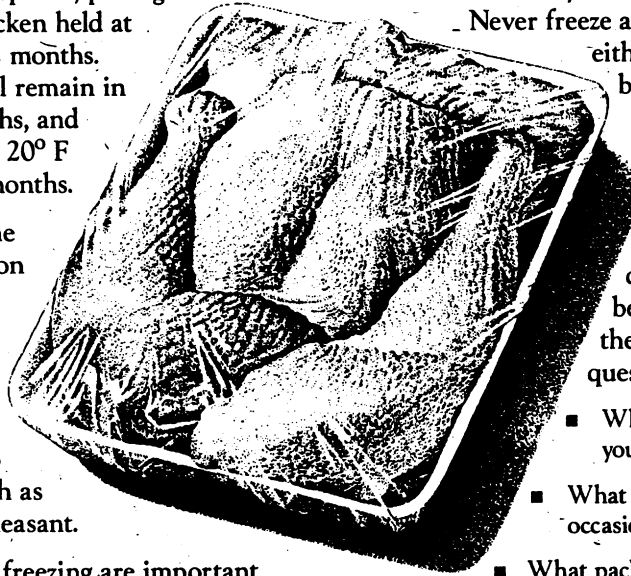
Airtight packaging and freezing are important considerations for the preservation of meat quality. When properly applied they will prevent dehydration and freezer burn, slow oxidation and fat rancidity, and prevent undesirable, and sometimes harmful, bacteria growth.

Basic food safety rules apply when freezing poultry. Assume all foods are contaminated with bacteria, so you must use proper sanitary procedures to avoid the potential ill effects. Keep the cutting board, table or bar, knives and all other utensils clean. Work quickly and place the poultry in the freezer as soon as possible. Do not cross contaminate ready-to-eat foods with raw poultry juices. Do not overload a

home freezer with large quantities of food to be frozen at once.

Use a ready-to-cook product to insure cleanliness and to make preparation easier. A ready-to-cook bird has all feathers, viscera, blood, feet and the head removed. It has been washed and cooled in ice slush long enough to lower the body temperature below 40° F. Freeze only ready-to-cook or cooked poultry.

Never freeze a stuffed turkey or roaster either cooked or uncooked. It is bacteriologically dangerous to do so.



Before you begin

Think about your family's daily and special occasion needs before preparing any product for the freezer. The following questions will help:

- What is the best package size for your family?
- What is the best package size for special occasions?
- What package shape will fit conveniently in the freezer?
- How many birds should be cut up and how many left whole?
- Should some packages contain only one type of part, — such as breasts, thighs or drumsticks?

Equipment

For whole birds, you need the following:

- a thermometer to determine freezer temperature. (Set a thermostatically controlled freezer at -20° F if possible, but definitely no higher than 0° F);
- plenty of free flowing water for thoroughly washing the birds before packaging;
- moisture/vapor-proof packaging material or containers; and

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- an acrylic cutting board.

For cut-up, halved, quartered or precooked poultry, you need the following additional materials:

- a sharp butcher knife and/or boning knife;
- a sharpening stone, file or other sharpening tool;
- sufficient work space and containers for holding parts; and
- cleaning supplies for keeping the area and equipment sanitary.

(A good sanitizing solution for equipment and work surfaces is a mixture of 1 tablespoon of household bleach per quart of water.)

Packaging materials

Use only moisture/vapor-proof material. There are many excellent materials for packaging poultry, but not all are readily available. The shrink-type bags in which frozen turkeys are packaged are available in sizes to fit broilers and chicken hens. These bags, which fit like a second skin, can sometimes be obtained from a locker plant or a meat packer. Do not use the plastic bags fruits and vegetables are purchased in, since they are not vapor proof. Self-sealing plastic freezer bags designed to hold various quantities of food are available at most grocery stores. Aluminum foil, closed tightly and formed to the product, makes an excellent freezing wrap. Light weight aluminum foil may be overwrapped with any kind of paper to protect it from ripping or tearing after the meat is frozen. Ordinary butcher paper is a good wrapping material if it is moisture/vapor-proof.

Plastic containers designed for freezing are also good packaging items, and they are readily available in many retail outlets. Square or rectangular containers allow better use of freezer space. Glass freezer jars may also be used. Pack the poultry parts directly into them, leaving a $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch space under the lid for expansion. Some people prefer to cover the parts with water. The water forces the air from around the parts and seals them as it freezes.

Freezing

Freezing maintains the high quality of poultry meat and preserves it for several months. The faster the meat freezes, the better. Since most home units do not have a fast-freezing compartment, poultry usually freezes slowly. Have the freezer temperature at least at 0° F, but lower is better.

Additional freezing instructions include:

- Remove body heat of home processed poultry before placing it into the freezer. (It should be chilled in ice slush to 40° F or lower.)
- Space packages so that they do not touch.
- Avoid overloading the freezer.
- Seal all packages with a recommended freezer tape. Check all container lids.
- Remove as much air as possible from each package. (Air in a package contributes to freezer burn and rancidity.)

Whole chicken

Broilers, fryers or mature hens purchased in unripped plastic bags may be placed directly in the freezer and kept there for 6 weeks to 2 months. If a bird is to be kept frozen longer, remove it from the bag and wash it thoroughly under cool, running water. Drain it for about 5 minutes, then wrap it, seal it and place it in the freezer. Rewrapping is required if the bird is to be stored longer than 2 months because bags used for wrapping fresh poultry are not usually vapor proof and air has not been removed from the packages.

Cutting-up chicken

Some people prefer to buy whole birds and then cut them up at home. This is an easy way to save both food dollars and time. There are many ways to cut-up or disjoint a bird. Extension leaflets L-1797, Boneless Breast of Chicken; L-1798, Chicken Cut-up: Family Style; and L-1799, Chicken Cut-up Commercial Style, illustrate three methods.

Before wrapping the disjointed parts, thoroughly wash each piece under cool, running water. Now separate the parts according to how you would like to serve them. For example, four drumsticks and four thighs in one package might be appropriate for a family of four. All bony parts may be packaged together for future use in chicken and dumplings or soup. You may also want to make chicken stock immediately and freeze it.

Cutting a turkey

Fresh turkey, slaughtered at home or purchased, may be cut into parts for freezing. Use large, unbasted turkeys because the larger the turkey is, the greater the yield will be. Frozen turkey may be carefully thawed, cut into parts and refrozen.

Refreezing poultry

Refreezing a thawed product is not usually recommended, but poultry meats react better than most other frozen foods and can be refrozen with little quality loss. Refreezing can be used to salvage poultry meat after a freezer malfunction or other unexpected thawing, but only if the meat has not been warmer than 35° F for longer than two hours. While working with a frozen turkey, keep the temperature of the meat below 35° F. Use sanitary equipment and materials and work rapidly. Place the rewrapped parts back into the freezer immediately. Do not refreeze the giblets or the neck.

Whole turkey

Whole, frozen turkeys may be placed directly into the freezer. Since some families cannot eat a whole turkey at once, halves, quarters or breast portions may be purchased. If these are not available, ask a butcher to cut it for you. After cutting, the bird must be rewrapped for proper storage in a home freezer. Use high quality, moisture-proof wrap.

Frozen poultry

Properly packaged poultry may be stored in a freezer at 0 to -20° F for 6 to 12 months with little quality loss. Date each package and maintain an inventory. Remember to rotate your stock so that first in is first out.

Thawing

Thawing time depends on the size of the package or bird and the method used. The most recommended method is placing the package on a plate or pan in the refrigerator from 1 to 3 days. Or, the package may be placed in a pan of cold water or under a cold water tap, if properly sealed. Do NOT thaw on the kitchen counter. The surface may become too warm before the interior thaws, thereby allowing the build-up of harmful bacteria on the surface.

Thawing rules include:

- Check the package often to determine progress.
- Thaw the poultry in the package in which it was frozen.
- The larger the package is, the longer it will take to thaw.
- The faster it thaws, the greater the drip loss.

Cook poultry as soon as possible after thawing.

Precooked meals

Many meals can be prepared ahead of time and placed in the freezer. Almost any thoroughly cooked poultry dish can be frozen. Use a meat thermometer to assure that the food has reached the proper final temperature during cooking. Whole muscle foods should be 180-185° F, while casseroles should reach at least 165° F. It is best to cook according to the recipe, and be sure to include standing time when cooking in a microwave oven.

Cool food immediately after cooking to temperatures below 45° F. Because cooling stops the cooking process, it helps preserve the natural flavor, color and texture. To cool, set the uncovered pan of food in ice or very cold water. Change the water to keep it cold. Or, place the pan directly on ice. Do not place a hot dish directly in the refrigerator because it may warm other foods and cause bacterial growth and spoilage.

Foods which are to be baked after freezing may also be frozen in oven-proof containers. Food may be frozen in the casserole it is to be baked in, then removed for freezer storage. To do this, line the casserole with aluminum foil before freezing. After freezing, remove the food and store it in the aluminum wrap. Remove the foil and replace the food in the casserole dish when you are ready to reheat or cook it.

Keep the food and surfaces of the counter, pans, spoons and other utensils clean. Be particularly careful with cooked poultry. Bacteria that cause spoilage are spread by handling. Mixtures containing sauces and gravies are especially susceptible to bacterial growth.

Freezing stops the growth of bacteria, but does not kill them. They are killed by heat. Most bacteria die at temperatures above 165° F. Most of the bacteria in foods grow between 40 and 140° F, so keep food cold, below 40° F, or hot, above 140° F. Reheat food thoroughly, above 165° F; reheat sauces and gravies to a rolling boil.

Timetable for Thawing Turkeys		
Pounds	Methods	
	Refrigerator (days)	Cool Water (hours)
4 - 6	1 - 1 1/2	3 - 4
8 - 12	1 1/2 - 2	4 - 6
12 - 16	2 - 2 1/2	6 - 7
16 - 20	2 1/2 - 3	7 - 8
20 - 24	3 - 3 1/2	8 - 10

The author acknowledges David B. Mellor and James H. Denton, former members of the Department of Poultry Science, The Texas A&M University System, who co-authored the original manuscript on this topic.



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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Zerle L. Carpenter, Director, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, The Texas A&M University System.

3M-3-94, Revision

F&N 3