

Storage Guidelines for Home Preserved Foods

Have you found a jar of home canned peaches or a bag of frozen strawberries from three years ago? Commercially produced foods contain sell-by or use-by dates, but how long can you keep home preserved food?

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Canned tomato jars; lawcain / bigstockphoto.com

A plumber said he never wanted to eat home canned food because he saw so many black moldy jars of food stored on open shelves in basements. He figured that they were many years old and, probably correctly, they might not be safe to eat. The point of this story is to inventory your canned goods each year putting older foods where they will be used first and discarding foods that have spoiled or have discolored to the point you will not use them. This is called the FIFO method, "first in, first out" method of storage. Put dates on both canned and frozen foods.

Home Canned Goods

The most important step is to use preservation methods that will control the growth of microorganisms. Use only research tested recipes that have determined time, temperature (or pressure), and processing method (boiling water, atmospheric steam, or steam under pressure) that will destroy bacteria, molds, and yeasts that can cause food borne illness or spoilage.

- Most canned goods maintain their quality for up to one year, therefore it is recommended you only can the amount of food that you will use within one year. However, if foods have been canned using [USDA recommendations](https://www.healthycanning.com/wp-content/uploads/USDA-Complete-Guide-to-Home-Canning-2015-revision.pdf) (<https://www.healthycanning.com/wp-content/uploads/USDA-Complete-Guide-to-Home-Canning-2015-revision.pdf>) or the recipes in Penn State's [Let's Preserve articles](https://extension.psu.edu/food-safety-and-quality/home-food-safety/lets-preserve) (<https://extension.psu.edu/food-safety-and-quality/home-food-safety/lets-preserve>), they will be safe as long as the seal is not broken.
- Canned goods stored in a cool, dry, dark place will keep their quality best.
- Prevent exposure to light. Store jars in closets, boxes or cover with paper to keep light away from the product.

- Save yourself time and effort by planning to can only the amount you will use within one year. There really is no point in canning all the beans in the garden if they are going to sit in a basement for several years, become soft, and end up being discarded.
- Prevent exposure to heat.
 - Store canned goods between 40°F and 70°F.
 - Avoid storing canned goods above 90°F. Avoid placing jars near heating pipes or a furnace or in direct sunlight. Canned goods can spoil and release their seal at high temperatures.
 - The quality (firmness, color, and flavor) of the product does deteriorate over a period of time.

Frozen Foods

When freezing food, the goal is to quickly reach temperatures of 0°F or below. Freezing does not kill microorganisms already present on or in the food, but does prevent their growth. While bacteria will not grow in food stored at 0°F, the quality of the food can deteriorate over time.

Freezer Burn

- Freezer burn is caused by moisture loss or ice crystals evaporating from the surface area of a food. It appears as grainy, brownish, dry looking spots.
- Freezer burn will show up if freezer bags get torn or lids of freezer boxes become loose or were not vapor proof to start with.
- Freezer burned areas are likely to develop off-flavors.
- Freezer burn will not cause illness but the desirability of the product is reduced.
- In severe cases of freezer burn, you may choose to discard the product.
- Freeze only the amount of fruits and vegetables that will be used within one year.

Freezing Meats

The recommended storage times for freezing meats for best quality varies with the type of meat and its fat content.

- Beef or venison roasts and steaks maintain good quality for 8 to 12 months.
- Whole chicken or turkey can be frozen for a year. It is best to use ground meat within 3 to 4 months.
- Cured meats such as ham and bacon can only be frozen for 2 to 3 months because their salt content hastens rancidity.
- Lean fish such as flounder or haddock are suitable for freezing 4 to 6 months, but fatty fish such as salmon or tuna are best used within 2 to 3 months.

Freeze-Thaw-Refreeze

- Check for signs that frozen food might have thawed and refroze during storage.
- Stained packages are a warning sign.
- Discard food that at any point has completely thawed and reached a temperature above 40°F.
- Keep a thermometer in the freezer.

Keep a Freezer Inventory

- One method of avoiding forgotten foods is to maintain an inventory near the freezer.

- List the foods and dates of freezing as you put them in the freezer.
- Check them off as you take foods out. You will then know the exact amounts and kinds of foods in the freezer at all times.
- Organize the food in the freezer into food groups for ease of locating.
- Arrange packages so that those which have been in the freezer the longest are the first ones used.

For commercially bought foods the USDA [FoodKeeper](https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/foodkeeper-app) app is a great tool to help you maximize the freshness and quality of all types of food items and help reduce food waste.

References:

Andress, E. & Harrison, J. (2014, updated 2020). *So Easy to Preserve*, Bulletin 989, Cooperative Extension. University of Georgia.

Penn State Extension. [Let's Preserve Fact Sheets](https://extension.psu.edu/food-safety-and-quality/home-food-safety/lets-preserve).

USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (2019, April 26). ["Food Keeper App"](https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/foodkeeper-app).

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