Effective storage in Fridges and Freezers
By Sarah Friedrich, OSCAR Care Group Auditor & Food Safety Trainer

Storing perishable foods and food ingredients in the fridge or freezer is primarily to prevent food poisoning or to slow down spoilage and loss of food quality.

At 5°C or colder and at freezing temperatures many bacteria that cause food poisoning and food spoilage either don't grow or their growth may be slowed down.

Remember though that there is a limit to how long food can be refrigerated as it will eventually spoil, the quality will deteriorate and some food poisoning bacteria such as Listeria monocytogenes can grow and cause infection.

Frozen food can be kept safely for longer although quality may deteriorate. To check if your fridge is operating at the correct temperature you need to purchase a thermometer and place it in the fridge. When you do this you might get some surprises. The temperature inside your fridge will vary several degrees as the fridge goes through its cycle. It will also vary markedly from one section to another.

The door is usually the warmest part and the top shelf is often the warmest shelf. We suggest you place your thermometer below the top shelf and towards the door to give a general indication of the fridge temperature.

Fridge Temperature

If the thermometer shows your fridge is higher than 5°C, adjust the fridge setting to lower the temperature. The crispers for fruit and vegetables will usually be slightly warmer so that the fruit and vegetables don't freeze.

You might have to adjust the fridge a few times to get it right, but ideally, you want the main compartment to spend most of its time around 4 to 5°C. Check that food looks and feels frozen to be sure your freezer is functioning correctly or use a thermometer if you have one covering this range. Partially frozen food will have a shorter shelf life.

What foods to store in the fridge

All perishable & cooked food should be stored in the fridge. This will prevent the growth of food poisoning bacteria, and it will reduce spoilage.

Check the labels on bottled & packaged foods as they provide storage instructions where necessary, eg "Refrigerate under 5°C". Also look for instructions that state "Refrigerate after opening" as many foods not required to be stored refrigerated in the past have been reformulated & now require refrigeration to prevent spoilage.

If you have a lot of food in the fridge, for a party or some other function, remove the drinks, pickles and jams to make more room. These foods can be left out of the fridge for a while. Good air circulation between items in the fridge is important to keep them cold.

Where to store foods in the fridge

Store ready to eat food (food eaten raw or won't be cooked further like a dessert, salad) above raw food.

Store raw meats, seafood and poultry where it is coldest. In many fridges this is the bottom shelf. Wherever you store raw meats, poultry and seafood, make sure that juices and liquids can't drip onto other foods. These juices might contain food poisoning bacteria which can contaminate other food if they drip onto it. If you have to store raw meats or poultry on higher shelves, put them in leak-proof, sealed or covered containers.

Avoid raw foods touching cooked foods and keep them separated in the fridge. Cover any cooked or ready-to-eat foods stored in the fridge to reduce the risk of cross contamination. For large quantities of food divide it up among several shallow containers so it cools faster. Cool food on the bench only until steam stops rising. Then place the hot food directly into the containers, cover with a lid and put them in the fridge.

Freezing and defrosting foods safely

When freezing food, avoid freezing large amounts at a time. It's better to split it into smaller quantities in separate containers. This also means you can defrost only the quantity you need.

When freezing food you've just bought, place it in freezer bags to maintain quality. You don't need to unwrap pre-packaged raw meat on trays, just put it in a freezer bag. This will help minimise cross contamination in your kitchen. Tie the bag after squeezing out as much air as possible, label & date. If you are freezing cooked food or leftovers the most important thing is to cool it quickly. Cool food on the bench only until it stops steaming. Then place the hot food directly into the container, cover with a lid and put it in the freezer.

When thawing frozen food thaw poultry, rolled or seasoned (stuffed) meat joints and boned meat joints right through to the centre before cooking. Thaw cooked or ready-to-eat foods in the fridge or microwave – not on the bench-top. Follow thawing and cooking instructions on packaged frozen food as some food don't require thawing before cooking.

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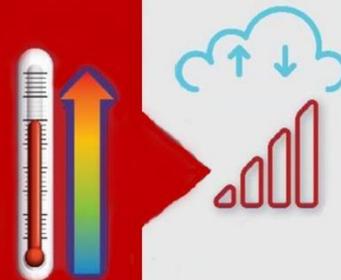
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Do you need further Food Safety information?

This article was written by Sarah Friedrich OSCAR Care Group Auditor & Food Safety Trainer. Please call or email Sarah via our contact details below.

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