



HYG-5334-09

Freezing Meat, Poultry, and Game

Meat, poultry, and wild game provide a healthy and nourishing food source, but in order to preserve quality, it is important that it be handled and preserved carefully, especially wild game and poultry. The flavor and texture of the final product depends upon the manner in which the meat is handled during slaughter. The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide suggestions for safely preserving wild game, meat, and poultry.

Freezing meat and fish is the most acceptable way to maintain quality. The meat should be chilled without delay to 40 degrees F or lower to prevent spoilage. Then, freeze meat using proper freezer wrapping materials (be sure freezer wrap is designed for freezing). Wrap meat tightly, pushing out as much air as possible. Freeze and store at 0 degrees F or lower. Most frozen wild game will keep up to one year without loss of quality.

When you are butchering or slicing any type of fresh meat, having a clean and sanitized work area is essential. Regular cleaning and sanitizing of the equipment, utensils, and work surfaces reduces the possibility of food contamination and the transmission of disease organisms. Although cleaning removes the visible soil, sanitizing reduces the unseen microorganisms that may be present on tableware such as cutting boards,

equipment, knives, and pans used to hold raw meats.

Chlorine bleach can be used to make a sanitizing solution for food contact surfaces. Use standard chlorine bleach for this purpose rather than the scented varieties. For cleaning and sanitizing:

- Add 1 Tablespoon of chlorine bleach to 1 gallon of water.
- Add 1 teaspoon of chlorine bleach to 1 quart of water.

When sanitizing equipment and utensils:

- Add 1 Tablespoon of chlorine bleach to 1 gallon of water. Change the bleach-water solution often to prevent dilution of the bleach.

Cutting boards and knives must be sanitized before use and allowed to air dry. Sanitizing certain types of cutting boards may present a problem. Even those that meet public health standards are difficult to sanitize and should be discarded or refinished when they become badly scored by knife blades. If wooden cutting boards are used, scrub them after every use with a nontoxic detergent solution and a stiff nylon brush, rinse, and treat with a sanitizing solution. Never submerge wooden cutting boards in a sanitizing solution.

Washing your hands is also important. Unsanitized hands are an easy way to contaminate the

food items you are working on. Hand washing should be done with warm, running water, and with soap. Hands should be washed for at least 20 seconds and dried with a single-use paper towel. Be sure to clean cuticles and fingernails, as these are places that are more difficult to clean. Jewelry should not be worn while butchering.

Cloths used for wiping down equipment and other surfaces should be wrung out frequently in a sanitizing solution and stored in the solution when not in use. Launder cleaning cloths daily or more, if necessary. Keep cloths used for food-contact surfaces separate from other cloths.

Large Game

Deer, antelope, moose, and other large game can be handled for freezing like any other meats. Trim and discard bloodshot meat before freezing. Package meat, seal, and freeze.

Small Game

Rabbit, squirrel, and other game should be skinned, dressed, and then chilled. Refrigerate for 24 to 36 hours until meat is no longer rigid. Cut meat into serving size pieces or leave whole. Package, seal, and freeze.

Game Birds

Dove, duck, pheasant, quail, and other game birds should be dressed and gutted immediately after shooting. Cool and clean bird properly. Remove any excess fat on wild ducks and geese because it becomes rancid very quickly. Freeze the same as directed for poultry. Do not stuff game birds before freezing them. Bacteria grow quickly when game birds are thawing or freezing. Commercially stuffed frozen birds have special procedures to insure safety.

Poultry

High-quality fresh poultry is best for freezing. Young tender birds are best for roasting, frying, and broiling. Older birds have more flavor and

are best for stewing and braising. Broilers, young hens, and roasters may turn dark around the bone when frozen. This is normal and harmless. Poultry should be eviscerated, cleaned, and cooled before packaging. Remove organs and membranes, and clean inside of the cavity. Make certain to wash all the pieces and pat dry. Freshly killed and dressed poultry should be cooled to 40 degrees F or lower for 24 hours before freezing.

Whole Birds

Fryers or broilers are the best whole birds to freeze. For storage of a month or less, whole birds can be packaged in a plastic freezer bag and sealed tightly. For longer storage, wrap the bird in a freezer plastic film, pressing out all the air, and over wrap with freezer paper or foil for an airtight seal. Make the body as compacted as possible, lock wings against the body or tie together. Ends or protruding bones may puncture package so consider padding them with freezer paper or foil.

After packaging, seal, label, and freeze immediately.

Halves, Quarters, and Pieces

Split or cut up birds into desired pieces. Place a double layer of freezer wrap or waxed paper between each piece. Package the same as whole birds. After packaging, seal, label, and freeze poultry. Arrange pieces into as compact and square a shape as possible so they will stack better in the freezer. Pack as for whole birds in freezer packaging. Seal, label, and freeze immediately.

Cooked Poultry

After cooking poultry, remove as much of the fat as possible. Place in plastic freezer safe containers or on aluminum foil trays covered tightly with foil and then packed in plastic freezer bags. Seal air tight. Label and freeze immediately. Vacuum packaging can also be used for freezing poultry.

Store-Bought Poultry

Store-bought packaging for poultry is not sufficient for moisture-vapor proof freezing.

Poultry may suffer from reduced texture, color, and increased potential for freezer burn and change of flavor over time. All store-bought poultry should be repackaged.

Storage

Maintain freezer at 0 degrees F or less. Frozen ground poultry should be used within 3 months. Meat such as beef, lamb, veal, and venison can last 6 to 9 months. Poultry, game birds, and rarities can last up to 12 months.

References

So Easy to Preserve: Fifth Edition. 2006. Cooperative Extension Service, University of Georgia, College of Agriculture, Athens.

Safe Food Handling for Occasional Quantity Cooks. 2006. Columbus: Ohio State University Extension.

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