

How to Safely Defrost (Thaw) Food



The freezer is a great place to store healthy foods to cook at home. But using unsafe thawing methods can allow germs to grow in foods, and these germs can then make you sick.

Do not thaw foods by leaving them at room temperature or by putting them in hot water. Instead, use one of the safe thawing methods described in this handout.

Thawing Foods in the Refrigerator

Any food can be thawed in the refrigerator. This is a slower method, so plan ahead—it can take a day or longer to thaw meats, poultry (like chicken or turkey), or fish in the refrigerator.

- Allow 24 hours of thawing time for every 1 to 5 pounds of food. For example, a 15-pound turkey takes about 72 hours (3 days) to thaw.
- Keep food in a sealed container or package until it thaws. Set frozen meat, fish, or poultry in a shallow bowl or container on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator. This keeps juices that could spread germs from dripping on other foods.

Thawing Foods in Cool Water

When you're short on time, you can thaw many foods in cool water. This method works well for hot dogs, shrimp, chicken breasts, fish fillets, and small cuts of meat. It may not be practical for turkeys or large roasts.

- Put the frozen food in a sealed plastic bag or other leak-proof package that will keep water and air from touching the food as it thaws.

Safety Tip

If you don't cook food thawed in the refrigerator right away, you can safely store it in the refrigerator for a little while.

- Raw poultry, fish, and ground meat can be safely stored for 1 to 2 days after thawing.
- Raw beef, lamb, and pork can be safely stored for 3 to 5 days after thawing.

- Submerge the bag in a bowl of cold tap water. (Use of warm or hot water for thawing is unsafe.)
- After 30 minutes, replace the water in the bowl with fresh cold water. Continue changing water every 30 minutes until the food is thawed.

Safety Tip

When you defrost foods in water, you must cook them as soon as they are fully thawed.

Thawing Foods in the Microwave

You can use the “defrost” setting on the microwave to thaw foods quickly.

- Check the manufacturer’s instructions, and set the microwave for the shortest amount of time suggested for defrosting the food.
- Be sure the food is in a microwave-safe container or packaging before you start thawing.
- Rotate food halfway through the defrosting time to help the food thaw evenly.
- When the time is up, check the food to see if it is fully thawed. If it is not, defrost again for a few seconds or minutes.

Safety Tip

Foods defrosted in the microwave may become warm or start to cook. To be safe, cook foods as soon as they have thawed. Do not refreeze foods thawed in the microwave unless they have been cooked.

Cooking Foods Without Thawing Them

Frozen foods can be cooked without being defrosted first.

- Try this method with frozen vegetables, frozen meals and appetizers, and hot dogs. Check packages for instructions.
- You can even cook frozen meat or poultry without thawing it first. Allow more time for cooking (about 1½ times the usual cooking time). Also, be aware that the texture and flavor of foods cooked this way may not be as good.

