

What To Do When Your Freezer Stops

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At some point in life, we might all have the challenge of deciding if food in the freezer is safe. The door may have been left ajar, or the power might have been out from a winter ice storm or summer wind and rain storm. Many people use the freezer to store foods for the year, so being prepared with a plan in place will be helpful when or if you are ever in doubt about whether the food in your freezer is safe. How do

you know what to do? Here's a list of safety tips to follow.

First, identify the problem. Is it within your home (such as a tripped breaker), or is the power out in the general neighborhood? A phone call to the electric company might give you an indication of the expected time of repair. If the problem is with your freezer only and not the breaker, you will need to determine whether to call the repairman or seek a replacement.

If at all possible, wait until power is restored before opening the freezer door. If your freezer is full, it will keep items frozen for about 48 hours. If the power will be out less than 24 hours, do not open the door when power resumes. Let your food items refreeze at least 24 hours before opening the door. Each door opening increases the interior temperature and decreases the time foods will hold safely without power.

The following conditions can decrease the time the freezer will hold safely:

- Opening the door during the power outage. This is especially true for an upright model.
- High room temperatures (above 85 F to 100 F).
- Initial freezer temperature above 0 F. Purchase a freezer thermometer and place it inside your freezer where it can be read easily. The colder your freezer is, the longer your food will be kept cold.

- Partially full freezer. Use milk jugs filled with water to fill up your freezer. A partially full freezer will keep food frozen less than half the time of a full freezer.

Ask yourself how you can change the above factors to increase the time your food would be safe in an emergency.

Freezer Location

The ideal location for a separate freezer is a cool, dry room. Keep at least 2 inches of clearance on each side and several feet of clearance above. The garage is not recommended; it is too hot in the summer and too cold in Ohio winters.

Be Prepared

In case of an outage or an equipment failure, it is helpful to know the temperature of the thawed food. Two tips will allow you to be prepared.

1. Place two or three ice cubes in a plastic freezer bag and seal the bag. Keep the bag in the freezer at all times. In an upright freezer, you can have a test bag on each shelf. If there is a power outage, you will know if the interior temperature was above 32 F if the cubes melt. If the cubes are melted, quickly determine the temperature of the water in the bag and you will know the temperature inside the freezer.
2. Have a thermometer on hand that will permit you to determine the temperature of the food or of the test packet mentioned above.



Create a Backup Plan

Identify the following so that you are prepared:

- If there is a commercial freezer/locker in the area, check on available storage space and costs. What about a friend, neighbor or local church that might have extra room? Place your frozen items in a box packed with newspaper and covered with blankets to keep the cold air as close to the food as possible. Move them to a working freezer as quickly as possible.



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- During winter months, temperatures outdoors might allow temporary storage of perishable foods (if temperatures are below freezing all day). Take precautions to prevent contamination, and keep the food out of the reach of animals.
- Is there a source of dry ice in your community? Also try searching the Internet for “carbonic gas,” but remember to handle dry ice with care. It is extremely cold and can’t safely touch human skin. A 50 pound cake of dry ice should protect the food in a full, 20-cubic-foot freezer for three to four days. Cover your freezer with blankets to keep the cold air inside, being cautious to keep air vents free and clear.

Guidelines for Safely Refreezing Thawed Food

As a general rule, completely thawed foods should not be refrozen. The quality will always be poorer, and spoilage might have taken place during the thawing and standing periods. Unfortunately, there is no home method to test whether a food is safe after thawing. Refreezing is always, to some extent, a calculated risk.

Most foods above 40 F for more than 2 hours are at risk for bacterial growth, which might lead to a foodborne illness and should be discarded.

- **Meats and poultry** (uncooked) can be refrozen if the freezer temperature is below 40 F and the color and odor of the foods are good. Discard any items that are not refrigerator cold.
- **Vegetables**, in general, should be refrozen only if they still have ice crystals on them and if the freezer temperature indicates they are 40 F or below. Discard if they are room temperature or if they show signs of spoilage.
- **Fruits** are least affected by freezing and thawing. They may be refrozen if they show no signs of spoilage or if they can be cooked or made into jellies or jams.

Exceptions would be those foods that are safe at room temperature, such as nuts, coffee and plain breads. If you have additional questions, call your local OSU Extension office.

Reference

nchfp.uga.edu/publications/uga/uga_freezer_stops.pdf. Accessed June 2014.

When In Doubt, Throw It Out		
Frozen Food	Partially Thawed (still cold, under 40 F)	Completely Thawed (warm, above 40 F less than 2 hours)
Fruits	Yes.	Probably safe, but might have fermented.
Fruit juice concentrates	Yes, but flavor might be poor and juice might separate.	Yes, but might have fermented.
Vegetables	Yes, but might wish to cook and use in vegetable mixtures before refreezing.	Yes, cook and eat. Or, cook, cool and refreeze.
Meat and poultry (uncooked)	Yes, if odor is normal. Might wish to cook and refreeze.	No, if there is an off odor; otherwise, cook and eat. Or, cook, cool and refreeze.
Variety meats (liver, heart, kidney)	No. If odor is normal, cook and use as soon as possible.	No.
Fish and shellfish (uncooked)	No. If odor is normal, cook and use as soon as possible.	No.
Cooked meat, poultry and fish	Do not refreeze. Cook and eat within 1–2 days.	Do not refreeze. Cook and eat within 1–2 days.
Combination dishes (pot pies, casseroles, whole meals)	No.	No.
Soups	Reheat thoroughly to 165 F, then cool and refreeze.	No.
Ice cream and sherbet	Safe, but quality is poor.	No.
Fruit pies	Yes.	Bake and eat.
Bread	Yes.	Yes, but will have poor texture.
Plain cakes and cookies	Yes.	Yes, but will have poor texture.
Cream-filled cakes and cookies	No.	No.

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