

The Daily Union
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Title: Preparing for Holiday Meals – Part 1

With Halloween behind us, you are probably looking ahead to the next big holidays. Even though you still have nearly 4 weeks before Thanksgiving, it is not too early to begin preparations. The little things you can do now can help you with food safety, meal planning, and budget-friendly meals.

For instance, have you thought about your refrigerator? Often overlooked and underappreciated, this appliance is one of the most important tools we use in today's kitchen! Our contemporary electric "ice boxes" are so much safer and more convenient than the wood boxes that used a block of ice to supply a rather undependable source of cold air.

What makes having adequate refrigeration important in today's home? Refrigeration slows the bacterial growth that is a natural part of our environment. Bacteria are found in our soil, air, water, and the foods we eat. When bacteria have nutrients (food), moisture, and favorable temperatures, they grow rapidly. This increases the numbers to the point where some types of bacteria can cause illness. Bacteria grow most rapidly when the temperature falls between 40 and 140°F. This range is known as the "Danger Zone." In an optimum environment, some bacteria can double in number in as little as 20 minutes. When set at 40 F or below, our contemporary electric refrigerators will protect most foods – unlike the "ice box" of old.

For safety, it is important to verify the temperature of your refrigerator. Some refrigerators have built in thermometers, but most simply have a dial setting labeled from cool to very cold.

Most refrigerator/freezer thermometers are either liquid-filled or bimetallic-coil thermometers. The United States Department of Agriculture describes these thermometers as follows.



Bimetallic-coil
Thermometer



Liquid-filled
thermometer

Liquid-filled thermometers are the oldest types of thermometers used in home kitchens. As the temperature increases, the colored liquid (usually an alcohol solution) inside the thermometer expands and rises to indicate the temperature on a scale.

Bimetallic-coil thermometers contain a coil made of two different metals with different rates of expansion that are bonded together. The bimetal element is coiled, fixed at one end, and attached to a pointer stem at the other end. As the temperature increases, the pointer will be rotated by the coiled bimetal element to indicate the temperature.

Purchase refrigerator/freezer thermometers in the housewares section of department, appliance, culinary and grocery stores. Buy two! Place one in your refrigerator and one in your freezer. It may be the best \$10 to \$20 investment you ever make. Two more tips:

- ✓ Place the thermometer in the front of the refrigerator/freezer in an easy-to-read location.
- ✓ Check temperature regularly — at least once a week. Remember, refrigerator temperature should be at 40°F or below. Freezer temperature should be at 0°F or below.

Now that you have addressed the temperature requirements for food, you should think about how and where you put perishable items inside.

You might think that you need to let the food cool to room temperature before you place it in the refrigerator. However, leaving perishable food out until it reaches room temperature often takes more than 2 hours to cool down. The longer the food is left out, the greater the chance that bacteria will grow to a harmful number. Instead, place hot food directly in the refrigerator or chill it in an ice or cold-water bath for a short amount of time before refrigerating. Cover foods to retain moisture and prevent them from picking up odors (or sharing their own odors) with other foods.

Divide large quantities up into smaller amounts. For example, parcel out a stockpot of soup into smaller single or double serving size shallow containers. A large cut of meat or whole poultry should be removed from the bone and the meat should be placed in shallow containers before refrigerating.

Where you place the food inside the refrigerator is important, as well. Raw meat, poultry, and seafood should be stored in a sealed container or wrapped securely to prevent raw juices from contaminating other foods. Placing these foods on the lowest shelf will help ensure that juices will not accidentally drip into other foods.

Some refrigerators have special storage features such as adjustable shelves, covered door bins, meat/cheese drawers and drawers for fruits and vegetables. Not only do these features make food accessibility more convenient, they also provide an optimal storage environment to store foods safely.

The adjustable shelving inside a refrigerator is an important feature. This allows for food packaged in a variety of sizes to be stored safely. A gallon of milk needs more height between shelves than a package of bacon. Tempered glass shelves are attractive and easy to clean. Some refrigerators have sealed glass shelves to contain spills and prevent cross contamination between foods while aiding cleanup. Yet other refrigerators offer pull out shelves to provide better accessibility to items in the back.

Be careful about what you choose to put in the door for storing. Perishable foods should not be stored there because the storage bins in the door fluctuate more than the temperature in the main cabinet of the refrigerator. Eggs should be stored in the carton on a shelf rather than in the door. Keeping the door closed as much as possible will help maintain the 40 F safe storage temperature in your refrigerator.

Join me next week as I share ideas about how to manage the contents and care of your refrigerator during the holiday season and throughout the year. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!