



## Freezing Foods: A Real Time-Saver

*Not only do frozen main dishes make your cooking life less hectic, they are also smart economically.*

Save yourself from the dinnertime crunch by preparing your own meals ahead of time. Form your own "make-ahead meals" club and invite friends over to prepare a week's worth of dinners--or just throw an extra meatloaf in the oven when you're preparing tonight's main dish.

### It's Cold in There

Not all freezer containers are created equal; use specially designed freezer bags, airtight containers, and aluminum foil to maintain the quality of your foods. Poorly wrapped foods risk damage from freezer burn--a loss of moisture which affects both taste and texture--and can absorb or transfer smells from other foods in the freezer. Follow these wrapping and container tips to ensure the quality and safety of your food:

- Use only specialty freezer wrappings: they should be both moisture-proof and vapor-proof.
- Leave as little air as possible in the packages and containers. When freezing liquids in containers, allow a small amount of head room for expansion. When using freezer bags, be sure to remove as much air as possible before closing. Solids such as meats and baked goods should be wrapped tightly in foil before you bag them.
- Use rigid containers with a tight lid and keep the sealing edge free from moisture or food to ensure proper closure.
- Secure wrapped packages and containers with freezer tape, and write the dish and the date on the tape with a marker.
- In many cases, meats and fish wrapped by the grocer or butcher need no extra attention before freezing. If the food you want to freeze was not specially wrapped, then re-wrap them at home. Meat wrapped on Styrofoam trays with plastic wrap will not hold up well to freezing.
- Freeze in small containers with no more than a 1-quart capacity to ensure that freezing takes place in a timely manner

### Make-Ahead Meals

- Cozy Cottage Beef Stew Soup
- Beefy Lentil Vegetable Soup
- Boilermaker Tailgate Chili
- Vegetarian Four Cheese Lasagna
- Ragù Bolognese
- Grandma's Homemade Italian Sauce and Meatballs
- Stephanie's Freezer Spaghetti Sauce
- Quick and Easy Green Chile Chicken Enchilada Casserole
- Chicken Florentine Rice Casserole
- Chicken Pot Pie II
- Meat Sloppy Joes
- The Best Meatloaf
- Burrito Pie
- Freezer Peach Pie Filling

### Freezing Tips

Cooling before freezing is necessary for two important reasons: firstly, extra heat will raise the temperature of the freezer, and secondly, the outer edges of the hot or warm dish will freeze hard quickly while the inside may not cool in time to prevent spoilage.

Follow these steps when preparing and freezing your own main dishes to ensure food safety and quality:

- Cool precooked dishes as quickly as possible before they are placed in the freezer.
- For fastest cooling, place the pan of hot food in a sink filled with ice water (or in a larger pan of ice water). If you're cooling a soup, stew, or sauce, stir occasionally to help it cool evenly.
- Once the dish is cooled, portion it into meal-sized containers or packages. Label and date the containers. Place them in

(i.e. within four hours). Food that is two inches thick will take about two hours to freeze completely.

• single layer in the coldest area of your freezer until completely frozen. Rearrange as necessary.

### Warming Trends

Thawing foods at room temperature is a bad idea--with the exception of muffins, breads and other baked goods. Bacteria can grow in the thawed portion of prepared foods, releasing toxins that are not safe to eat even after cooking. To ensure that your food is safe to eat, follow one of these proper ways to thaw:

- **In the refrigerator:** Plan ahead, as this is the slowest but safest thawing technique. Small frozen items may thaw in a few hours, while larger items will take significantly longer--overnight and then some.
- **In cold running water:** Place the frozen food in a leak-proof bag and place it under cold running water. If this seems wasteful, put the plug in the sink, and keep an eye on the water level. Bail out extra water and use it for your plants.
- **In a microwave on the defrost setting:** Plan to cook the food immediately after it has thawed in a microwave, because some areas of the food may have begun cooking during the defrost cycle.

### Best if Used By:

Although freezing keeps food safe for an indefinite amount of time, that doesn't mean it'll taste good: eat your dishes within a reasonable time period for quality's sake. And if the food is obviously damaged (shriveled, with white or frosty spots) it should be discarded.

This chart lists recommended storage times for popular precooked foods--casseroles, soups, lasagna--to ensure high-quality results:

Type of Food	Storage Time
Tomato/vegetable sauces	6 months
Meatloaf (any type of meat)	6 months
Soups and stews	2-3 months
Poultry and Meat Casseroles	6 months
Poultry (cooked, no gravy)	3 months
Poultry (with gravy/sauce)	5-6 months
Meatballs in sauce	6 months
Pizza dough (raw, homemade)	3-4 weeks
Muffins/quick breads (baked)	2-3 months

### Don't Crowd the Freezer

- A temperature of 0 degrees F (-18 degrees C) is best for maintaining food quality. Proper air circulation is key to keeping your freezer operating at maximum efficiency.
- Freezing does not kill bacteria, yeast and molds that may be in your foods--it merely holds them at bay by keeping them inactive. If the freezer's temperature is disturbed often or altered for an extended period of time (such as a door left ajar or power outages) these microbes can compromise your food's safety.

- How to Freeze Fruits and Vegetables

### More Guidelines

Need more? Ask the Feds! The United States Dept. of Agriculture offers in-depth info on freezing food and food safety issues. Check it out.

- USDA Freezing and Food Safety

# How to MAKE MAIN MEALS AHEAD OF TIME

Being a mom of 5 sons I had to cook all the time. I found by making some things ahead of time and freezing them it saved me a lot of time when it was time to cook the main meal. When I worked it was hard to come home and make a large meal because of school and homework and other things that needed to be done. By preparing some things ahead of time it was a lot easier to give them this large dinner without a lot of preparation when I was tired. Check back often to find more resources I have used to save time and help with cooking for a full house.

## Instructions

Difficulty: Easy

1. Buy about 20 lbs of Ground Beef ahead of time. Prepare your meatloafs, burgers (#), meatballs, hamburger steaks or salisbury steaks and any other meals that require us to use Ground Beef. For the meatloaf add all ingredients, work the ingredients until mixed well and then start with separating the meat for different meals. Make about 2-3 meat loafs ahead of time but don't cook them yet. Work your hand in the middle of each one until you have made a deep impression and add your Velveeta. Now fold ends and sides over making sure the cheese is well covered and won't all leak out. Now wrap them, bag them whatever way you choose. Freeze the meatloafs. When you come home from work just pop one in the oven with some water so as not to burn on bottom. Drain water or sometimes it cooks down, now add your sauce on top and you have your fast meatloaf without having to stand there and cut everything up before the meal. Do the same thing with the meatballs and burgers. Prepare them ahead of time and freeze them. Now they are all ready for the stove or oven and you did all the preparation in one sitting ( like on a Saturday after grocery shopping)
2. Once the ingredients are mixed, roll the meatballs and place them in a freezer (#) bag and freeze. When your ready to use them just place them in the oven with a little water and cook. Throw sauce on top and heat. YOUR DONE!
3. Burgers are nice but freezing them and stacking them can be a pain. My kids loved the Wendy's burgers and so do we. How do you get those square burgers. Take a ball of ground beef prepared the way you like with whatever ingredients you wish. Place the ball of meat in center of plastic wrap. Fold sides over and roll with a rolling pin. Fold ends over and roll again with a rolling pin. After making them all evenly flattened to the thickness you like make sure they are wrapped well and either place in freezer like that or place them in a bag and freeze.
4. You can now make your hamburger steaks ahead of time too for that salisbury steak dinner the same way as the meatloaf. Prepare the ingredients. Mix together well. Roll them or use your hands to mold them to the shape you want and wrap and freeze in freezer bags.

## Things You'll Need:

- Okay you will need to find things on sale and use them wisely especially if you have a large family. Things are so expensive now days and when we find a deal we want to make sure we take advantage of

## Tips & Warnings

- The best part of this is you have taken 20 pounds of ground beef, cut up all the ingredients over the weekend and added them to the meat. You now have your meatloafs, burgers, hamburger steaks, meatballs all ready for a quick meal. Just add condiments and your done. No mixing after the first day it's already to throw in the oven or on the stove and less dirty dishes because you did all the cutting up and ingredients ahead of time. Less work to do on a work or school night. The burgers stack nice in the freezer.
- Another good thing is when you want to store (FREEZE) that uncooked left over ground beef and you don't want to sit it out to thaw or stick in a microwave to thaw it's easy to thaw them by preparation before freezing. Place about 1lb of ground beef in a quart size storage bag. Roll with a rolling pin to even the meat thickness out. Now it will be thinner and thaw faster than it does when you just throw it in a bag in a big lump. The burgers cook the same all the way through because the meat is evenly distributed while cooking. You have the same thickness throughout the burger so you won't be taking a bite out of a burger to find the center is RAW! When the ends are done so is the middle because you have rolled them to a square like you would get at Wendy's.
- Don't be mad at me if your family is tired of eating ground beef...haha. You can make your meals so fast by preparation before freezing. All those extra dirty dishes from preparation have been washed already and in one sitting while preparing the ground beef ahead of time.

## Country Casserole

- 2 cups small shell pasta, cooked and drained
- 3 cups frozen mixed vegetables, cooked and drained .
- 2 cups shredded cheddar, divided
- One can French fried onions, divided
- 2 cups shredded cooked chicken (can use canned chicken)
- 1 can cream of chicken soup
- ¼ cup milk
- 1 tsp pepper
- 1 tsp garlic powder
- ½ tsp salt

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Combine everything in a large bowl, reserving half of the cheese and half of the onions for topping later. Spoon into 9×13 casserole dish. Bake for twenty five minutes. Top with remaining onions and cheese, bake until cheese is melted, about five minutes more.

**Freezing options:** Instead of freezing this in your casserole dish, simply spoon it into a gallon ziploc bag. Lay the bag flat so that it will thaw out quicker and place it in your freezer. On the day you want it, take it out the night before and refrigerate or place in fridge that morning.

If you forget to do all of this, no sweat! Just microwave the bag until it thaws just a bit, pour into your casserole, and bake!

To bake a casserole that is still frozen, simply place in the oven while the oven preheats. This allows the casserole to thaw quickly and then bake to perfection!

### **Pulled Pork Enchilada Casserole**

Alter the spiciness of this homey, cheese-crust ed casserole—really a lazy way of making enchiladas—by using a hotter salsa. I used Trader Joe's Double Roasted Salsa and mild enchilada sauce, and it had only a touch of heat, which hit the mark for serving a big crowd. You can always fancy it up with chopped scallions, cilantro, and avocado, too.

TIME: 20 minutes active time

MAKES: Two 8"x8" casseroles, each serves 6

2 pounds boneless pork butt or shoulder  
2 (12-ounce) jars salsa  
1 (15-ounce) can diced tomatoes  
1 (14-ounce) can enchilada sauce  
Vegetable oil spray  
20 corn tortillas  
1 cup sour cream  
4 cups shredded Mexican-style cheese

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. Place the pork (with strings, if applicable) in a large ovenproof pot with a lid (such as a Dutch oven), pour the salsa over the top, and bake for 3 hours. (Yes, that's all.) Let cool to room temperature. Remove any strings.

*or  
crock pot  
on high  
= 6 h-3*

Transfer all the salsa and liquid to a food processor, and puree with the diced tomatoes and enchilada sauce. Pull the pork into bite-sized shreds and set aside, removing any large pieces of fat.

Change the oven temperature to 350 degrees.

Spray two 8" square pans with the vegetable oil. Spread 1/2 cup sauce in the bottom of each pan. Tear 5 corn tortillas in half, and arrange them in a couple layers in one pan, turning some of them so the flat sides touch the edges of the pan, then repeat for the second pan. Add half the pork to each, then divide the sour cream between the two pans, spreading it right over the pork. Add 1 cup shredded cheese, then 1 cup of the sauce, to each pan. Add another layer of 5 halved tortillas to each, then divide the remaining sauce between the two pans, and top each with another cup of shredded cheese.

Bake the casseroles for 45 minutes, until the cheese is melted and browned. Let sit for 10 minutes before serving.

You can also wrap casseroles first in foil, then in plastic, then freeze and reheat at 350 degrees in just the foil for 1 hour. Remove the foil and bake until browned.

## Twice Baked Potatoes

Hi I like to make up a bunch of twice baked potatoes to freeze for unexpected company to make just bake up a bunch of potatoes, scoop out inside and mash insides with what ever suits your fancy; mushrooms, sour cream, milk, butter, bacon ect. I make it like mashed potatoes

then scoop back into the shell top with shredded cheese and wrap well in plastic wrap, like 2 times freeze and when company comes pull out and rebake in HOT oven without covering till warmed though. YUM!

I use the excess that would not fit back into the shells as a side dish on the day I make them ahead!

ENjoy!

## Olive Garden Alfredo Fettucine

8 ounces Cream cheese -- cut in bits

3/4 cup Parmesan cheese -- grated

1/2 cup Butter or margarine

1/2 cup Milk

8 ounces Fettucine; cook -- drain In large saucepan combine cream cheese, Parmesan, butter and milk, stirring constantly until smooth. Toss pasta lightly with sauce, coating well. Leftovers freeze well.

## CREAMY CHICKEN ENCHILADAS

Servings: 6

2 large onions -- thinly sliced

2 cups cooked chicken -- chopped

1/2 cup roasted red peppers -- chopped

6 ounces cream cheese -- cubed

2 tablespoons butter

1 package flour tortillas

1 large green enchilada sauce -- can

8 ounces Monterey jack cheese -- grated

salt -- to taste

In a wide frying pan over medium heat, cook the onions in butter, for 20 minutes. Stir frequently to keep onions from burning. Remove from heat and add chicken, red bell peppers, and cream cheese; stir gently to blend, and season with salt. Pour a little green sauce in bottom of 9X13 baking pan. Spoon about 1/3 C of filling down center of each tortilla and roll. Set enchiladas, seam side down in baking pan. Continue until pan is full. Cover with remaining sauce and top with grated cheese. At this point you may cover and refrigerate. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. If refrigerated, bake for 30 minutes, 15 minutes covered, remove foil and bake 15 minutes more. If not refrigerated, bake uncovered for 20 minutes. Makes approximately 12 enchiladas.