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The Big Thaw - Safe Defrosting Methods for Consumers



Uh, oh! You're home and forgot to defrost something for dinner. You grab a package of meat or chicken and use hot water to thaw it fast. Is this safe? What if you remembered to take food out of the freezer, but forgot and left the package on the counter all day while you were at work?



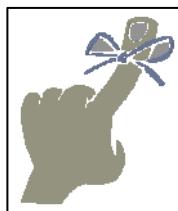
Neither situation is safe; these methods of thawing may lead to foodborne illness. Food must be kept at a safe temperature during "*the big thaw*." Foods are safe indefinitely while frozen. However, as soon as food begins to defrost and becomes warmer than 41 °F, any bacteria that may have been present before freezing can begin to multiply.

Foods should never be thawed on the counter or defrosted in hot water. Food left above 41°F (non-refrigerated) is not at a safe temperature.

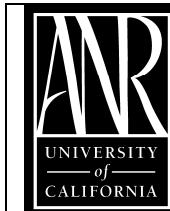
Even though the center of the package may still be frozen, as it thaws on the counter, the outer layer of the food is in the "Danger Zone," between 41 °F and 135°F – temperatures where bacteria multiply rapidly.

When defrosting frozen foods, it is best to plan ahead and thaw food in the refrigerator where food will remain at a safe, constant temperature – 41 °F or below. There are three safe ways to defrost food: the refrigerator, in cold running water, and in the microwave.

Refrigerator Thawing:



Planning ahead is the key to this method because of the lengthy time involved. A large frozen item like a turkey requires at least a day (24 hours) for every 5 pounds of weight. Even small amounts of frozen food such as a pound of ground meat or boneless chicken breasts -- require a full day to thaw. When thawing foods in the refrigerator, there are several variables to take into account:



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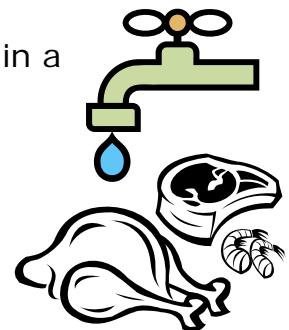
- Some areas of a refrigerator may be colder than others. Food placed in the coldest part will require longer defrosting time.
- Food takes longer to thaw in a refrigerator set at 35°F than one set at 41°F.

After thawing in the refrigerator, ground meat and poultry should remain useable for an additional day or two before cooking; red meat, 3 to 5 days. Foods defrosted in the refrigerator can be re-frozen without cooking, although there may be some loss of quality.

Cold Water Thawing:

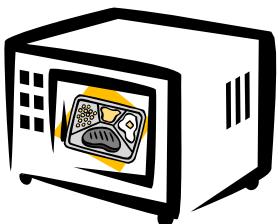
This method is faster than refrigerator thawing but requires more attention. The food must be removed from its wrapper and placed in a bowl or similar container.

Cool water should be left on to flow over the entire food surface. Water should be running fast enough to flush the exterior surface of the food product. This method should not be used for more than two hours, which should be adequate for small packages of meat or poultry (about a pound).



Once thawed completely, the food must be cooked immediately. Foods thawed by cold water method should be cooked before re-freezing.

Microwave Thawing:



When microwave defrosting food, plan to cook it immediately after thawing because some areas of the food may become warm and begin to cook during microwave defrosting.

Holding partially cooked food is not recommended because any bacteria present wouldn't have been destroyed and, indeed, may have reached optimal temperatures for bacteria to grow. Foods thawed in the microwave should be cooked before re-freezing.