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## **Food Safety Focus: Mail Order Food Safety**

Convenience means many things to many people, but anything that helps save time is always high on everyone's list of conveniences. With more Americans working and being more time-crunched than ever, the ultimate time saver and convenience is home delivery of mail order foods.

While the mail order industry enjoys a good safety record, ordering food through the mail may cause concerns about food safety, shelf life, and distribution. It's imperative to develop some mental checklists for how both food and packaging should look when perishable mail order foods arrive. This is especially true for meat, poultry, fish, and other perishable foods such as cheesecake, which must be carefully handled in a timely manner to prevent foodborne illness.

The following food safety tips will help the purchaser and recipient determine if their perishable foods have been handled properly:

- Make sure the company sends perishable items, like meat or poultry, cold or frozen and packed with a cold source. It should be packed in foam or heavy corrugated cardboard.
- The food should be delivered as quickly as possible -- ideally, overnight. Make sure perishable items and the outer package are labeled "Keep Refrigerated" to alert the recipient.
- When you receive a food item marked "Keep Refrigerated," open it immediately and check its temperature. The food should arrive frozen or partially frozen with ice crystals still visible. Even if a product is smoked, cured, and/or fully cooked, it still is a perishable product and must be kept cold. If perishable food arrives warm, notify the company. Do not consume the food. Do not even taste suspect food.
- Tell the recipient if the company has promised a delivery date. Or alert the recipient that "the gift is in the mail" so someone can be there to receive it. Don't have perishable items delivered to an office unless you know it will arrive on a work day and there is refrigerator space available for keeping it cold.

Americans also enjoy cooking foods that are family favorites and mailing these items to family and friends. The same rules that cover the mail order industry also apply to foods prepared and mailed from home. Make sure perishable foods are not held at temperatures between 40 and 140 °F, the "Danger Zone", for longer than 2 hours. Pathogenic bacteria can grow rapidly in the "Danger Zone", but they do not generally affect the taste, smell, or appearance of a food. In other words, you cannot tell that a food has been mishandled or is unsafe to eat.

For perishable foods prepared at home and mailed, follow these guidelines:

- Ship in a sturdy box.
- Pack with a cold source, i.e., frozen gel packs or dry ice.
- When using dry ice:
- Don't touch the dry ice with bare hands.
- Don't let it come in direct contact with food.
- Warn the recipient of its use by writing "Contains Dry Ice" on the outside of the box.

- Wrap box in two layers of brown paper.
- Use permanent markers to label outside of the box. Use recommended packing tape.
- Label outside clearly; make sure address is complete and correct.
- Write "Keep Refrigerated" on outside of the box.
- Alert recipient of its expected arrival.
- Do not send to business addresses or where there will not be adequate refrigerator storage.
- Do not send packages at the end of the week. Send them at the beginning of the week so they do not sit in the post office or mailing facility over the weekend.
- Whenever possible, send foods that do not require refrigeration, e.g., hard salami, hard cheese, country ham.

See the illustration to the right (reprinted from Food News for Consumers, Holidays 1988) for an example of a safe way to ship perishable foods.

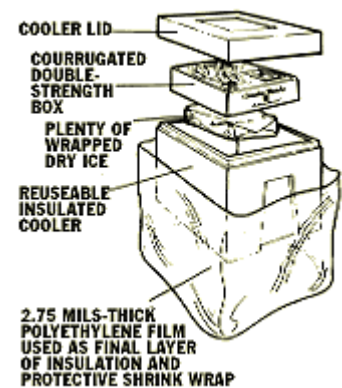
Use the [handy chart](#) on page 4, compiled by the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline and FDA Outreach and Information Center, to plan your purchase, send a home-prepared item, and store popular mail order foods.

If mail order foods arrive in a questionable condition, you may contact the following organizations for help:

- USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline 1-888-MPHotline, weekdays 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (1-888-674-6854) (meat, poultry, and egg products)
- FDA Outreach and Information Center 1 (888) 723-3366 weekdays 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (any foods other than meat, poultry, and egg products)
- Mail Order Action Line, Direct Marketing Association, 1111 19th Street, Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20036

The Mail Order Action Line (MOAL) is a free consumer service sponsored by the Direct Marketing Association. MOAL acts as an intermediary between consumers and direct marketing companies to resolve complaints on a timely basis. Consumers may register complaints with MOAL by writing to the above address; phone calls are not accepted.

**"MINIATURE DEEP-FREEZE" PACKAGING**



Consumers requesting assistance through MOAL should include the complete name and address of the company involved in the complaint, photocopies (not originals) of any canceled checks, order forms, other relevant documents, and a letter summarizing the facts of the complaint.

MOAL will refer the letter to the company on the consumer's behalf and ask that the company resolve the matter. The majority of MOAL complaints are resolved successfully within a 30-day period.

**SAFE HANDLING OF MAIL ORDER FOODS**

N/A - not advisable

<b>FOOD ITEM</b>	<b>CONDITION UPON ARRIVAL</b>	<b>STORAGE Pantry</b>	<b>STORAGE Refrigerator 40 °F</b>	<b>STORAGE Freezer 0 °F</b>
Beef and Lamb; steaks and roasts	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	3-5 days	1 year
Game Birds	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	1-2 days	1 year
Pork, chops, and roasts	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	3-5 days	6 months
Turkey – smoked, cooked	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	7 days	6 months
Turkey – whole, uncooked	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	1-2 days	1 year
Ham -- country	Room temperature	1 year	Sliced, 2-3 months	1 month
Ham -- whole, fully cooked	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	7 days	1-2 months
Ham -- canned, labeled "Keep Refrigerated"	Refrigerator cold	N/A	6-9 months unopened; 7 days opened	1-2 months opened
Ham -- canned, shelf stable	Room temperature	2 years	3-4 days opened	1-2 months opened
Ham -- fully cooked, vacuum sealed at plant, undated, unopened	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	2 weeks	1-2 months
Ham -- fully cooked, vacuum sealed at plant, dated, unopened	Frozen or refrigerator	N/A	Use by date	1-2 months
Sausage – dry fermented, not labeled "Keep Refrigerated"	Room temperature	4 -6 weeks	6 months unopened; 2-3 weeks opened	1-2 months
Sausage – Summer, not labeled "Keep Refrigerated"	Room temperature	4-6 weeks	6 months unopened; 2-3 weeks opened	1-2 months
Sausage – Summer, labeled "Keep Refrigerated"	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	3 months unopened; 3 weeks opened	1-2 months
Frozen entrees – meat or	Frozen	N/A	3-4 days after	2-3 months,

<b>FOOD ITEM</b>	<b>CONDITION UPON ARRIVAL</b>	<b>STORAGE Pantry</b>	<b>STORAGE Refrigerator 40 °F</b>	<b>STORAGE Freezer 0 °F</b>
vegetable			cooking	cook frozen
Caviar -- non-pasteurized (fresh)	Refrigerator cold	N/A	6 months unopened; 2 days opened	Do not freeze
Caviar -- pasteurized, vacuum package	Room temperature	Refrigerate upon arrival	1 year unopened	Do not freeze
Hors d'Oeuvres/Pastries	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	3-4 days after cooking	3 months
Lobster – live	Alive in sea water	N/A	1-2 days, alive	Do not freeze
Salmon – smoked, clear vacuum package (e.g., Nova Lox)	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	7 days unopened; 2 days opened	2 months
Salmon -- vacuum packaged, and/or labeled "Keep Refrigerated"	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	7 days unopened; 2 days opened	2 months
Salmon -- smoked, heavy metallic pouch in outer cardboard container, shelf stable	Room temperature	1 year unopened	2 days opened	N/A
Frozen entrees – seafood	Frozen	N/A	2 days after thawing	1 year
Cheese – soft (e.g., cream cheese)	Refrigerator cold	N/A	2 weeks opened	N/A
Cheese –processed or hard	Safe at room temperature, but refrigeration prolongs quality	N/A	3-6 months unopened; 3-4 months opened; 2 weeks sliced	small pieces 6 months
Cheesecake	Frozen or refrigerator cold	N/A	7 days	3 months
Fruit -- fresh*	Refrigerator cold or room temperature	* Different types of fruits can be stored for about 1 to 2 weeks in the pantry or refrigerator, or frozen for up to 1 year.		
Fruit -- dried	Room temperature	1 month	6 months after opened	N/A

<b>FOOD ITEM</b>	<b>CONDITION UPON ARRIVAL</b>	<b>STORAGE Pantry</b>	<b>STORAGE Refrigerator 40 °F</b>	<b>STORAGE Freezer 0 °F</b>
Fruit Cakes/Plum Pudding	Cold or room temperature	1 month, quality better if refrigerated or frozen	6 months	1 year
Fruit/Nut Breads	Cold or room temperature	N/A	7 days	6 months
Frosted cakes, layered tortes, petit fours	Frozen or refrigerator cold	2 days	3 days	2 months
Chocolate candy/other confections	Cold or room temperature	1 year	1 year	1 year
Jams/Jellies	Room temperature	12 months unopened	6 months	N/A
Pickles, pickled vegetables	Room temperature	1 year	2 months opened	N/A
Olives	Room temperature	1 year	2 weeks	N/A
Oils: Olive or vegetable	Room temperature	6 months unopened; 3 months opened	N/A	N/A
Nut oils	Room temperature	6 months unopened	4 months	N/A
Vinegar	Room temperature	2 years unopened; 1 year opened	N/A	N/A
Mustard	Room temperature	1 year unopened; 1 month opened	1 year opened	N/A
Honey	Room temperature	1 year	N/A	N/A
Maple syrup	Room temperature	2 years unopened	1 year opened	N/A
Nuts – cans, jars, or cellophane	Room temperature	1 year unopened	6 months opened	1 year opened
Tea– Bags	Room temperature	18 months	N/A	N/A
Loose	Room temperature	2 years	N/A	N/A
Instant	Room temperature	3 years	N/A	N/A
Coffee –	Room temperature	1-3 weeks	N/A	3-4 months

<b>FOOD ITEM</b>	<b>CONDITION UPON ARRIVAL</b>	<b>STORAGE Pantry</b>	<b>STORAGE Refrigerator 40 °F</b>	<b>STORAGE Freezer 0 °F</b>
Whole beans, non-vacuum bag				
Ground, in can	Room temperature	2 years	2 weeks	N/A
Instant, jars, & tins	Room temperature	1 year unopened; 2-3 months opened	N/A	N/A

For additional food safety information about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854); for the hearing-impaired (TTY) 1-800-256-7072. The Hotline is staffed by food safety experts weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time. Food safety recordings can be heard 24 hours a day using a touch-tone phone.

The media may contact the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at (301) 504-6258.

Information is also available from the FSIS Web site: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>

The USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

For Further Information Contact:

FSIS Food Safety Education Staff

Meat and Poultry Hotline:

1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) - Tollfree Nationwide

1-800-256-7072 (TDD/TTY)

E-mail: [mp hotline.fsis@usda.gov](mailto:mp hotline.fsis@usda.gov)