

Buying Mail-Order Meat

Elizabeth Boyle, Ph.D.
Department of Animal Sciences and Industry
Kansas State University
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Mail-order catalogues provide consumers with the luxury of ordering merchandise without having to leave home. By simply flipping through the pages of a catalogue, you can have a gourmet meat market available at your fingertips. It is important to be aware that many of these meat products are perishable. They must be kept cold during shipping and delivery; otherwise, they may not be safe to eat.

Call and talk to a customer service or sales representative when ordering perishable meat products from a catalogue. You should ask the company what kind of cold source will be used to keep meat products cold and how long the package will be in transit. Perishable meat products should be kept at refrigeration temperatures, 40°F or less, during shipment. Some companies will pack perishable meat products in an insulated or styrofoam container containing dry ice or cold packs. Or, they may freeze perishable meats and send the package using overnight delivery in cold weather so that the product will arrive firm and cold to the touch. Any meat product labeled "keep refrigerated" should be kept cold during shipment.

Once you know how long transit time will be, set a delivery date with the company. If you are planning to be out-of-town, arrange for someone to receive the package the day it is expected to arrive. Perishable meat products can spoil if you wait several days to pick up the package after it has arrived at the Post Office. Also, ask the company if the package will be labeled "perishable food" on the outside of the box. This may help ensure that the package is delivered in a timely manner.

When the package arrives, open the box and touch the product. Fresh or cooked meat, poultry and fish should arrive frozen or still hard in the middle. Ice crystals may be evident and the meat should be cold. If the product wasn't previously frozen, it should be cold to the touch. Smoked and cooked meats, including most baked and canned hams, that are not marketed as shelf-stable products should also be delivered cold. Perishable meat products that are warm when the package is delivered should not be consumed. Shelf-stable products such as dry sausages, whole dry-cured country hams, jerky and meat snack sticks do not require refrigeration. After you have checked the product temperature, store perishable meat products in your refrigerator or freezer.

If you have questions about mail-order meat products, contact the company where you purchased the product or call the USDA's Meat and Poultry tollfree hotline at 1-800-535-4555.