

Storing Meat

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Fresh meat is a perishable product. Historically, meat was preserved for future consumption by curing, smoking and drying. With the introduction of locker plants during the early 1900's, people could rent cold storage space or lockers to store meat. One of the first plants to rent cold storage space was the Chico Ice and Cold Storage Company of Chico, California, around 1903. It wasn't until the late 1930's, however, that cold storage locker plants became widely available. There were over 500 locker plants in Kansas by 1950. Refrigeration and freezing are still the most common methods used to prolong the shelf life of meat.

To accommodate a variety of foods, many home refrigerators have temperatures from 36 to 40F. Fresh meat should be stored at 28 to 32F to minimize changes in product quality. If that isn't possible, store meat in the coldest part of your refrigerator. Perishability increases, however, as storage temperature approaches 40F. Using a thermometer will help you monitor the temperature in your refrigerator. Even under ideal refrigeration conditions, meat that will not be used within a few days should be frozen.

In general, the maximum length of time ground meat can be safely stored in a refrigerator is 1 to 2 days. Beef cuts can be stored refrigerated for 3 to 4 days, pork cuts can be stored for 2 to 3 days, and raw poultry can be stored for 1 to 2 days. A package of lunch meat that has been opened should be used within 3 to 5 days of refrigerated storage.

While freezing is an excellent method to preserve meat, it will not "save" meat that has already begun to deteriorate. To preserve optimum quality, meat to be frozen should be handled with the same care as refrigerated meat. If you plan to freeze meat for longer than 1 or 2 weeks, the meat should be rewrapped or overwrapped in material designed for use in the freezer. Freezer paper, aluminum foil, specialty wraps or food storage freezer bags can be used. Improperly wrapped meat is susceptible to freezer burn which is caused by a loss of moisture on the surface of meat. Freezer burned meat will have a dry, discolored surface that, when cooked, will be tough and taste bland or rancid.

In general, the maximum length of time ground beef can be stored frozen and retain maximum quality is 3 to 4 months. Pork contains more unsaturated fatty acids than other meats, making it more susceptible to oxidation and rancidity. Because this can lead to the development of off flavors and odors, ground pork should be stored frozen no longer than 1 to 3 months. Beef cuts can be stored frozen 6 to 12 months, pork cuts can be stored for 6 months, and poultry can be stored for 9 months.

For more information on storing meat, contact your local county extension office.