

Storing Food At Home

Let Common Sense, Your Taste Buds, Guide you to Storing Food At Home

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If you live in the "boonies" - or are considering a move to the country- storing food is of vital interest. That "quick trip" to the couter market that a city dweller can count on if he runs short of milk or spagetti takes me an hour or more.

Living, as I do, without conventional utilities presents other food storage problems. Yet anyone can safely and easily store enough food in sufficient variety to live for a year, if necessary, between shopping trips.

The first rule of food storage is "store what you eat and eat what you store." When you 're snowed in or stressed out because you lack gas money for a long trip to town you are not going to want to experiment with eating unfamiliar foods! Studies have shown that not only to people prefer familiar foods, especially during trying times, but that abruptly changing the diet can have uncomfortable side effects.

What you store and how you store it will also be affected by your situation and the reasons for your storage program. If you have freezer space available you can count on this food for times of poverty, but you risk loosing it all from a prolonged power outage. Thus, I recommend storing a wide variety of foods in various forms. Let's look at the "basic 4" and then other items needed for a typical diet.

Meats and protein foods

This group includes not only animal foods, but the easy-to-store dry beans, peas and nuts. You can store meat, poultry and fish in your refrigerator, freezer or canned on the shelf. Storage temperature, moisture and light conditions can affect the length of storage and the quality of all stored products. Non-refrigerated, non-frozen tiems are best kept in a dark, dry location with a temperature between 50-70 degrees.

"Refrigerator" temperature is defined as above 32 degrees but below 50 degrees Farenheight. The lower the temperature, the better the long-term storage, but I've found my cellar and a cool, below-ground room to be excellent "refrigerator substitutes" for about 9 months of the year, for many items.

I reserve my summer 'fridge - a tiny propane-powered RV model - for items that really need low temperatures, in the warm months, like dairy products and meat, and opened containers, mostly. For long term storage of frozen foods, make sure your freezer stays at or below 0 degrees. Many refrigerator-freezers to no keep this temperature well and are suitable only for relatively short-term storage.

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To avoid nutrient loss in frozen foods, make sure they have appropriate vapor barriers in their packaging. the plastic packaging on meat in the supermarket is NOT sufficient for freezing; add a layer of freezer wrap or ask your grocer to freezer wrap your meats.

Fresh Eggs keep in the 'fridge for an amazing month! For long storage, locate a source for food processing dry egg solids. These are not the powdered egg mix that you got as scrambled eggs in college or the Army, but are used in commercial bakeries for use in baked goods. They are used according to package directions in place of fresh eggs in any baked goods recipe except angelfood cake, I think! I use them a lot when our chickens mouls and have even substituted them for whole, fresh eggs in my Grandma's homemade noodle recipe.

I consider dry beans, peas and lentils excellent storage food. They keep for years when stored in a cool, dry place in rodent-resistant containers. It will take a little tome to accustom your family to a large diet of beans if you are not now big bean eaters. Tradition says adding cetain herbs to the bean pot mitigates the gas problem.

Other cooks add baking soda. I presoak my beans then drain off that water and add fresh water for cooking. I have also heard of an enzyme additive called "Legume-Aid" that helps folks digest beans, but have never seen the product or used it (1996 addition: I have now used a product called Beano and recommend it for digestive tracts hostile to beans.) If you think dry beans are inconvenient, try soaking up and canning a batch for use later as "fast food". Don't forget nuts and nut butters. Even the "just nuts and salt" brands store well, unopened.

Milk and cheese

Fluid Milk stores remarkably well under refrigerated conditions. The main problem with large families like outs if finding aplace to put large quantities of milk, especially in the summer. If you have a 40 degree cellar, you can store milk there. And if, like me, you hate to be "wastey" you'll find all sorts of recipes for sour-milk baked goods to use up any odd ends of milk that "turn". Yes, you can use even pasteurized, homogenized sour milk. Everyone knows about storing non-fat dry milk, but not every family will drink it. I can sometimes get it past my kids (who prefer whole milk) by mixing it a little "rich" and getting it very cold...then they'll at least eat it on cereal!

But using dry milk for cooking is an excellent way to keep fluid milk for a beverage. In a sauce or baked goods, no one can tell dry milk from fresh. Mice love to get into dry milk, though, so repackage it in airtight and mouseproof containers. I like glass jars for this. cheese stores well refrigerated (or in that cool cellar); for longer storage it can be frozen. Thawed cheese is crumbly, though, so don't plan to slice it.

You can somtimes find powdered cheese (an ingredient in processed food) for your storage shelves. This is usually in a can and lasts forever. Use it by adding the powder to a white sauce to make a cheese sauce or you can addit directly to saucy dishes for cheese flavor and protein. We eat it in Spanish rice and other Mexican-style casserole dishes.

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Grains

The basis of some food storage programs is wheat. Wheat is a good storage item, as it's versatile and stores forever. If you don't have a grain grinder and aren't used to eating whole wheat you'll probably find it pretty uninteresting. Actually, most whole grains (as opposed to flour) store well so I recommend using and storing whole grains, including rice, and having a grain grinder.

If you are used to eating white flour products, by all means store white flour! It keeps better than whole grain flours and even if you're currently buying all your baked goods it makes a good storage item. Everyone likes fresh-from-the-oven homemade bread! The individual ingredients in baking mixes store better than the mixes. I keep a file of mix recipes, for basic mixed and recipes to use them with. Our pancake mix recipe is even written on the side of the gallon jar we keep it in; that one's kept full!

Pasta also keeps well if it's dry and away from mice. We also buy dry cereal in institutional bags. With seven (or more) hungry mouths to feed, they seldom go stale! Here, again, store it in glass jars to preserve freshness if your family is small. We also buy and store cooked cereal in bulk and often make granola to individual tastes. Looking for treats? If no one wants to bake...rev up the popper and break out the popcorn. Even for us, a 50-pound bag is a year's supply...and the end pops as well as the first serving.

Vegetables and fruits

The traditional backbone of a food storage program is home canned fruits and vegetables. Whether you do-it-yourself or buy case lots on sale, these foods will store for a year without losing quality, as do properly packaged frozen foods. For variety, store some fruits and veggies fresh as well.

Potatoes, onions, carrots, winter squash, cabbage, beets, apples and pears are the easiest to store and most like a cool moist cellar (onions and potatoes are the exception). If you have an unheated area that doesn't freeze, add moisture to your cellar by spreading a layer of sand or dirt (if you don't have a dirt floor) or sawdust and sprinkling this layer with water. I also store dry foods like instant potatoes, soup mix and dry fruits in my pantry.

Other essentials

While they aren't in any food group anymore, there are other items that you will need to store. These include oil, shortening, margarine and/or butter, sugar and/or honey, yeast, baking powder and baking soda, salt, herbs and spices. You will want to include other foods you use often such as cocoa, coffee, tea, gelatin and pudding.

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mixes. While you're thinking storage, don't forget extras of essential non-food items like TP, soaps, bleach, matches and drugstore items you rely on.

One of the easiest ways to build up your storage is to watch for sales and buy extras of regularly used items. We used to regularly "invest" our income tax refund in food storage (you can't eat money!)

It is also important to rotate and monitor your storage so that you use the oldest stock first and so that you don't lose track of what you have on hand.

How much to store?

How long you can eat on your storage depends on not only how much food you have on hand, but also on how well balanced it is. It can be a real help, during summer months, to have a garden, too. We have lived on our storage alone for weeks and once for several months when my husband lost his job...but after a while we were eating a little "funny."

It takes lots of will power not to eat your favorite foods up all at once! But actually eating off your storage is the best way to see how well it will actually work and find out what you forget...and what you need more of!

How much of each type of food to store depends on your family size and their ages and appetites as well.

Based on USDA guidelines, Table 1 gives a rough chart of how much you would need to feed one "average" person for a week. Tables 2 through 5 give the storage lives of various foods.

Of course there are no hard and fast rules of storage. Many folks, though, are learning the freedom that having even a minimal food storage program can bring...freedom from panic when strikes threaten or weather closes everything down...freedom from immediate price crunches...freedom from emergency trips to the store and inconvenient and difficult times. I know that we almost relish our usual run of "snow days" in our remote home. We build up the fire, break out the baking goods and laugh at the storm, snug as squirrels in our well supplied nest.

Table 1 - Requirements for 1 person for 1 week

Meat/protein 4 eggs

28 oz. meat

oz dried beans

Milk products 7.6 qt. fluid milk

or 30.4 oz. cheese

ora combination

grains 4.4 pounds

Vegetables/fruit 12 oz. carrots/cabbage

or 3 lbs. other green or yellow

and 3 lbs. or more potatoes

and 2.5 lbs. tomatoes/citrus fruits

and 1.5 lbs. apples

or 4.6 lbs other fruit

...plus the other essentials (salt, fat, etc.) in proportionate quantities)

Table 2 - Storage conditions for various items

Item Condition Rotate before

canned meat, fish, poultry commercially packaged or pressure canned per USDA 18 mo.

dry eggs airtight package 6 mo.

dry beans, peas verminproof package 5 yrs.

nuts original package 9 mo.

peanut butter original package 12-18 mo.

dry milk verminproof, airtight package 6-12 mo.

textured vegetable protein airtight package 12 mo.

powdered cheese verminproof, airtight package 3 mo.

whole grain flour verminproof package 2 weeks

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white flour verminproof package 12 mo.
prepared mixes verminproof package 8 mo.
raw, hot cereal (oatmeal, cream of wheat) verminproof package 6 mo.
cold commercial cereal original package 12 mo.
whole grains (wheat, oats, rye, rice, triticale, etc.) verminproof package indefinitely
cornmeal verminproof package 6 mo.
pasta airtight package 2 yrs.
popcorn verminproof package 12 mo.
instant potatoes verminproof package 18 mo.
canned vegetables commercially packaged or per USDA 12 mo.
dehydrated vegetables airtight package 8 mo.
canned fruit commercially packaged or per USDA 18 mo.
pickles commercially packaged or per USDA 1 yr.
jam/jelly commercially packaged or per USDA 18 mo.
baking soda unopened indefinitely
baking powder unopened indefinitely
cocoa original package 18 mo.
yeast airtight package 2 mo.
salt/spices moistureproof package indefinitely
sugar moistureproof package indefinitely
honey moistureproof package indefinitely

Note: these are conservative estimates but based on proper storage conditions. After the "pull date" the times may still be safe, but of poorer quality.

Table 3 - Storage of refrigerated foods

Item	Condition	Rotate before
fresh meat	original package	4 days
hot dogs, lunch meat	original package	4 weeks
eggs	original package	4 weeks
fluid milk	original package	2 weeks
cheese	original package	6-8 mo.
fresh greens	bagged in plastic, with damp paper towel	1 week
berries	ventilated container	1-2 weeks

other vegetables ventilated container 3-5 days
tomatoes ventilated container 2 weeks
yeast airtight container 6 mo.

table 4 - Storage of frozen foods

Item	Condition	Rotate before
meat	air/moistureproof package	1 yr.
poultry	air/moistureproof package	6 mo.
fish	air/moistureproof package	3 mo.
cheese	air/moistureproof package	1 yr.
butter	air/moistureproof package	1 yr.
bread	air/moistureproof package	6 mo.
vegetables	air/moistureproof package	1 yr.
fruits	air/moistureproof package	1 yr.

Table 5 - root cellaring

Item	Condition	Rotate before
potatoes	moderately moist	6 mo.
onions	cool, dry	6 mo.
carrots	moderately moist	6 mo.
pumpkins/winter squash	moderately dry, cool	6 mo.
cabbages	moderately moist	6 mo.
citrus fruits	moderately moist	6 wks.
pears	moderately moist	4 mo.
apples	moderately moist	6 mo.