



# Food Facts Highlights:

## Make Ahead Freezer Meals

During the cold winter months, it can be fun to be in a warm kitchen, preparing food ahead for those busy spring weeks when there is yard work and gardening to do in addition to the normal chores. The following are some tips on preparing, and freezing, food ahead.

- **Don't overcook food items that are intended for the freezer**, and be particularly careful to slightly undercook pasta, rice, and vegetables. [Note: baked goods, however, should be fully cooked.]
- **Cool all foods completely** by setting meals in the refrigerator for at least an hour before freezing.
- **Package items for the freezer** in moisture-proof, airtight and odorless containers. Examples include zip-top plastic freezer bags (not food storage bags); rigid plastic or glass containers with wide mouths and tight-fitting lids; or heavy duty aluminum foil.
- **Plan ahead** for those foods that will go from the freezer to the oven. Package casseroles and other items that you will cook from the frozen state in aluminum trays or Pyrex cookware; cover with heavy-duty aluminum foil.
- **Make certain all freezer containers are sealed completely** and that you've removed excess air before sealing. [Air trapped in a container can react with the food, destroying nutrients and producing off flavors during extended storage.]
- **Don't forget to label each package** (try a permanent ink marker) with reheating instructions before freezing. Include the name of the meal, date frozen, number of servings, temperature and length of time it bakes, and any other necessary information. You can add any personal notes such as marking extra stars for your favorites.

### Check list for high quality make-ahead frozen food:

- Food is packaged in small portions.
- Food is packaged in shallow containers.
- Container or packaging fits the shape and size of the food to be frozen.
- Food is packed tightly to eliminate as much air space as possible.
- Container or packaging is almost full, leaving only a little space for the food to expand as it freezes.
- Excess air is pressed from freezer bags.
- Container or bag is tightly sealed.
- Contents of freezer are organized so wrappings don't become loose or pierced.
- Packages are labeled with a freezer marker indicating the contents, number of servings, and date of storage.
- Food is placed in a single layer on freezer shelves until frozen.
- Freezer is set to and maintains 0°F degrees or below
- Freezer is not freezing too much food at a time.
- An inventory identifying each food in the freezer and its "use by" date is posted on the outside of the freezer and is updated each time an item is removed.
- Food is thawed in refrigerator unless otherwise directed.

More ideas can be found on these web sites:

- Make ahead and freeze <http://lancaster.unl.edu/food/ftnvdc99.htm>
- Cook once, eat twice <http://lancaster.unl.edu/food/ciqf.htm>
- Freezing cooked foods <http://lancaster.unl.edu/food/ciq-freezing-techniques.htm>
- Freezing prepared foods <http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/publications/uga/FreezingPreparedFoods.pdf>

A freezer storage list is found online <http://www.oznet.k-state.edu/humannutrition/hrap/storage/stochart.htm>  
January 2006.