

how to **freeze** fresh food at home



● carolyn humphries

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foulsham

LONDON • NEW YORK • TORONTO • SYDNEY

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First published in Great Britain in 2002 by W. Foulsham & Co. Ltd

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Epub ISBN 9780572039950

Kindle ISBN 9780572039943

Book ISBN 9780572035891

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Introduction

There are lots of books on the subject of freezing, but this one is different. There is no complicated terminology. It tells you exactly what to do and when to do it in an easy-reference format – it's as simple as that!

I haven't wasted space on information on buying a freezer as the chances are you already own one. However, I will offer just two pieces of advice. Get the biggest one you can afford and accommodate – you will always wish you had bought a larger one! Also I would not recommend buying a combined fridge/freezer – if one part breaks down and is irreparable, you don't want to have to ditch the whole thing, so buy them as two separate units.

Freezer management is crucial, and I offer a foolproof system. Without labels, every piece of frozen food tends to end up looking the same and then it's all too easy to thaw stewing beef, thinking it's lean, tender rump or to tip frozen crushed strawberries into your Bolognese sauce, thinking they are tomatoes from the previous year!

The second part of this book gives you straightforward information on the preparation and packaging of foods to be frozen. If food is just popped into the freezer, willy-nilly, without any preparation, then it will most certainly spoil, tasting tough and unpleasant on thawing. Packing is important too. Food won't keep in peak condition if you leave it in thin plastic bags from the supermarket; in fact, it will spoil very quickly.

All the methods in this book are simple and it's packed with all the basic information you need for successful freezing. You can see exactly what you can and can't freeze, how to do it, and for how long it can be stored. There are tips on batch baking, defrosting and cooking from frozen too. In fact, *How to Freeze* tells you everything you need to know about freezing!

Freezer Management and Maintenance

A well-stocked freezer is a great asset, saving you time and trouble. But it can only do this if you know what's in it and how to find it instantly. Rummaging around for ages, looking for the right meat amongst all the anonymous packages is crazy. You will be getting frostbite, while the contents of your freezer warm up and the machine burns extra electricity trying to compensate for being open for so long. It need never happen as long as you use a system of labelling.

Labelling

Many so-called experts recommend keeping a book, in which you list the contents of each package and when you freeze it (so you'll know when it should be eaten by). Others swear by colour coding. Sadly, in my experience, even the best of us can only keep methods like this up for a week or two, then it's just too much hassle looking for the book, or we don't have the right coloured pen and we're back to that mountain of UFOs – unidentified frozen objects. But, be warned: if you don't have some way of telling what's what, even if you're convinced you'll remember what each item is, I guarantee that a month later you won't have a clue!

No-effort marking

The solution, I have discovered, is my system of No-effort Marking. The only vital tools are a marker pen and white sticky labels.

1 Simply write on the left-hand side of the label what the food is, the date and the quantity.

2 Then on the right, mark a large, bold letter (as big as you can get on the label) depicting what sort of food it is. Also, if you have time and space, add any tips of extra flavouring or thickening needed when defrosted.

3 Stick it on the bag or container. The choice of letters you use is up to you. For example:

- M – meat and poultry
- F – fish
- V – vegetables
- Fr – fruit
- C – cakes
- B – bread
- P – pastry
- S – sauces
- So – soups
- D – dessert

The letters are self-explanatory but to be on the safe side, keep a list of them written on the inside of the freezer door, or stuck to the front. Also, if possible, keep different foods on different shelves or in different baskets for easier finding – fruit and veg in one area, meat and fish in another, bread and cakes in a third, sauces, soups and ‘bits and pieces’ in another.

Of course, this lovely system does tend to go out of the window when you come home from the supermarket with a load of bargains to be frozen immediately and have space only on one shelf or in one basket! But as long as you use the labelling system and the large letter is easy to see, you should never have a problem. Try and get in the habit of rearranging everything properly as soon as a space becomes available. But don’t get obsessive about it!

Colour coding

Colour coding can be used in much the same way, instead of the system of letters. One of the simplest ways is to use different coloured sticky freezer labels. Using an indelible pen, write what the food is, the quantity, the date and any special instructions on the labels as before and stick them on polythene bags or rigid containers.

You could use colours like this:

- Red – meat
- Green – vegetables
- Blue – fish
- Yellow – fruit
- White – baked good, such as bread, pastry (paste), etc., plus sweet dishes made with chocolate, coffee and so on that don’t fall into any of the other categories

Again, you must make sure you write your code on the inside of the freezer door (or stick it to the front) so that you remember it and other members of the family understand it when they are rummaging around.

An alternative to the coloured labels is to use plain labels but with different coloured indelible pens, chinagraph or waxed pencils (if using this method use a black marker for baked goods as white won’t show up). You can also use appropriately coloured twist ties for bags, or you can buy different coloured freezer tapes to seal bags and stick on to rigid containers.

A third way is to buy very large different coloured plastic bags. You then put all your meat in the red one, veg in the green one and so on. The only thing you **MUST** remember is to put them in the right bags. But even if you don’t do it all the time, at least some of your foods will be quickly identifiable!

You can also use small coloured plastic bags and rigid containers with different coloured lids to match your code, but they are more expensive than ordinary freezer bags and containers. There is also the danger that you will run out of the colour you want to use. Then you’ll end up putting the food in the wrong coloured bag or box and the system will be ruined. So perhaps it’s best to stick to my No-effort Marking.

Food rotation

It is important that you don't keep putting new foods on the top of older items, otherwise you will simply keep using the freshest food, leaving the rest to fester underneath. In the supermarket, you will have seen the assistants pulling the older packs to the front, putting the fresher goods behind them, and you should do the same. Try to use up one whole batch of meat, for instance, before starting on the new one, and eat the apple turnovers you made two months ago in preference to the little apple pies you made only last week.

Manageable quantities

When you're unpacking your shopping, instead of pushing the food quickly into the freezer, stop and think for a second. If, for instance, you've bought a family pack of 12 pork chops at a bargain price, are you going to eat them all at once? Probably not – so separate them into the numbers you are likely to use in one go, wrap them properly (see Wrapping food), and label them before putting into the freezer. In the same way, if you have a glut of fruit or your runner beans from the garden all crop at once, always freeze them in usable quantities (say, enough for two or four servings) so you never have to thaw more than you need.

Storage times

Don't make the mistake of thinking that food lasts in the freezer indefinitely. Although a mammoth discovered under the ice has been preserved for thousands of years, anything frozen does deteriorate after a while and some items more quickly than others. So do take note of the recommended storage times throughout the book and endeavour to eat the foods within that period. It won't do you any harm to eat them later, but the texture and flavour will become impaired, so you may not enjoy them very much.

Cleaning your freezer

It is important to keep the freezer clean and hygienic.

- Before you use your new freezer for the first time, wipe it out with a clean cloth rinsed in a bowl of hot water with 15 ml/1 tbsp bicarbonate of soda (baking soda) added. You should do this every time you defrost it too.
- Wipe the outer surfaces regularly with a clean, damp cloth, rinsed in detergent or

an anti-bacterial cleaner, and clean around the seals.

- Make sure you remove any spills or damaged bags of food as soon as you notice them.
- If your freezer is stored in a garage or outhouse, polish the outside with silicone wax from time to time to protect it.
- Brush the dust and cobwebs off the pipes and wires at the back of the freezer from time to time if possible – if it's built-in this will only be possible when it is serviced, however. Most manufacturers recommend that a recognised engineer services your freezer once a year.

Defrosting your freezer

Some freezers are self-defrosting but if not, you will need to defrost the freezer at least once a year for a chest freezer and two or three times a year for an upright model. In between times, scrape off any frosty ice that accumulates inside with a plastic scraper (usually provided with your freezer).

It's best to defrost your freezer when your stocks are low. It is a good idea either to deliberately run down the amount of food so you can do this or to choose a time of year when it is naturally less full – perhaps before you go fruit picking in the summer, before your garden produce is in full flourish or before you have a massive stock-up for Christmas.

- Ideally choose a cool day.
- You will need to insulate the food so that it does not defrost while it is out of the freezer. Place an old blanket or layers of newspapers on the floor and pile the freezer contents on top. Wrap thoroughly, packing any quick-thaw items, such as ice cream, in the middle of the pile, so they are protected by other frozen objects around them.
- Switch off your freezer.
- Lay more newspaper or an old towel around the base to mop up any water that may trickle out.
- Put bowls of hot water on the shelves and the base of the freezer, to speed up the melting process.
- If your freezer has a drain hole, attach the pipe that comes with the freezer to the hole and place a large bowl under it to catch the thawed ice.
- Close the door for a few minutes so that the temperature inside rises with the heat of the water.
- As soon as the ice begins to melt, knock it off with a plastic scraper – NEVER use a metal knife or wire brush or you may damage the machine. Remove in lumps from the cabinet.
- Keep replacing the hot water as it cools.
- When all the ice is gone, wipe out the cabinet with a clean cloth, rinsed in hot water with 15 ml/1 tbsp bicarbonate of soda (baking soda) added. Dry with a dry

cloth.

- Set the freezer to ‘fast-freeze’ and close the cabinet. After 15 minutes check that it is working properly, then sort the food and return it to the freezer. Keep back anything that has reached the end of its storage time and use it immediately.
- Turn the freezer back to ‘normal’ setting after 2–3 hours.

Insurance

Most manufacturers recommend you take out an extended warranty to protect the freezer and food against accidental damage. Weigh up the cost – you may find it very expensive measured against your potential loss. Also check out your house contents insurance policy; your freezer and its contents may well be covered by this, and if not, it may be a relatively low extra cost to have them included.

In case of breakdown

Many freezers now have warning light or an alarm, which will sound if the freezer temperature rises above $-18^{\circ}\text{C}/0^{\circ}\text{F}$. If yours goes off, don’t panic and rush to call an engineer. You may be able to solve the problem yourself.

First, check to see if the control lights on the freezer are lit. If not, there may have been a power cut. Check your cooker or microwave to see if their displays are lit. If they are flashing, the power has gone off but has now come back on. If there is no sign of life, the power is still off. If the freezer is definitely off, check the following list.

1 Make sure that the electrical plug has not been accidentally switched off. (It’s a good idea to tape over the plug in its socket so this can’t happen.)

2 Check the fuse in the plug has not blown.

3 Check the mains: has the trip switch for the whole house been triggered or has the fuse for the circuit supplying the freezer blown?

If the freezer appears to be on, check this list.

1 Cast your mind back: if you have put too much unfrozen food in the freezer at one go, this will raise the temperature, as will rummaging around too much, keeping the lid or door open for too long.

2 Check that nothing is preventing the lid or door shutting properly.

3 Check that the seals are not damaged.

4 Make sure that the ice has not built up too much inside – this will prevent the machine from working efficiently.

5 Think about the weather – is it exceptionally hot outside and have you have been opening the freezer a lot?

6 Check that air can circulate round the outside of the cabinet (it should not be placed directly against a wall – check your instruction booklet for details).

7 Clean off any grime that may be clogging the condenser and pipes.

If you still can’t solve the problem, call an engineer.

What about the contents?

Resist the temptation to open the freezer. The contents will keep perfectly well for up to 24 hours before starting to defrost. The fuller the freezer, the more time you have.

If you have been away and you have no idea how long the freezer has not been working, you may still be able to salvage some of the contents. Check every item, as follows:

- If there are still ice crystals inside the item and it feels very cold, all items can be re-frozen.
- If there are no ice crystals but the food still feels cold, fruit and baked goods, such as bread, cakes, etc., can be re-frozen. Raw meat, fish and poultry in this condition cannot be re-frozen. However, they can be cooked and then re-frozen.
- Vegetables like this should be cooked and eaten, or made into soup or other made-up dishes then re-frozen for no longer than 3 months. Cooked dishes should be reheated and eaten. Do not re-freeze.

Power cuts

If you suspect there has been a power cut, look at an electric clock or your central heating timer. It will tell you how long the power has been off. If the power is still off, phone the emergency line of your electricity supplier and find out how long the cut is going to last.

Don't open the freezer. If it is full, it will stay frozen for at least 24 hours, half-full, about 12 hours. Most power cuts will be rectified long before this.

As a damage prevention precaution (which probably won't be needed), pack newspapers or old towels round the base of the freezer to mop up any water if the contents start to thaw out completely.

If the power doesn't come back on in plenty of time, consider asking family, friends or a friendly shopkeeper (not affected by the same cut, of course!) if you can borrow space in their freezer for your food. You will then have to pack it up in insulated bags, or put in boxes, wrapped in plenty of newspapers; blankets or towels to insulate it while you transport it.

If it's too late and the food is defrosting, see the checklist earlier for what to do with the contents.

Packing and Storing

Just as you protect yourself from the cold, so you must protect your food in the freezer – or the equivalent of frostbite will occur and it will lose colour, texture, nutrients and flavour. To prevent oxidation, which makes the food smell and taste unpleasant, all air must be excluded too (see later for how do to this).

Freezer wrapping

There are loads of suitable wrappings and containers available to store your frozen food properly. Here are the most useful.

Clingfilm (plastic wrap)

You must use clingfilm that is suitable for the freezer. I recommend a multipurpose one, which can be used in the microwave and for other food wrapping too. Check that the film complies with the government recommendations for general food use.

Foil

Heavy-duty foil is best because it won't tear easily. Use it to cover foods as a lid over an open container, to wrap bread, meat, cakes and other solid items completely, and to protect bone ends before wrapping in clingfilm or polythene bags. You can just twist and fold foil to secure it but this must be done tightly or the package will come undone. If necessary, seal with freezer tape. Foil is available in various widths and lengths in rolls, or in single sheets. The big advantage is that foods can be thawed and reheated in the foil if appropriate (but not in the microwave of course!).

Foil containers

Rigid foil containers are ideal for storing everything from chunky soups to casseroles. You can also use them both to cook and freeze prepared dishes, which can then be thawed and reheated in the same dish in a conventional oven. They usually come with foil-lined cardboard lids, which can be written on for easy labelling. Foil containers are designed to be disposable but sometimes can be re-used; scrub very thoroughly to avoid contamination.

Foil bags

These are ideal for freezing liquids, such as soups or sauces, as they have a polythene lining and are very strong and leak-proof. (A cheaper alternative is to freeze the liquid in a polythene bag placed in a rigid container; you can then remove the rigid container once the contents are solid. Square or rectangular containers are best for this as they make frozen shapes that are easy to stack and store.)

Heavy-duty polythene bags

These are specially designed for freezing food and come in a variety of sizes, either loose or in rolls. I find it's useful to have a few small ones to hand for those little odds and ends you need to freeze, but on the whole, medium-sized bags, about 20 x 30 cm (8 x 12 in) are most useful for an average family. Experience will tell you what suits your requirements best.

Ordinary plastic bags should not be used – they will split easily, exposing the food to the ice and causing freezer burn (a whitish-grey discoloration of the surface, spoiling its texture and flavour), and, of course, spilled free-flow foods like peas, raspberries and breadcrumbs will spread themselves to every corner of the appliance. That said, in an emergency ordinary bags will do the job, provided they are tied tightly and overwrapped completely with foil.

Rigid containers

Made of polythene or other hard plastic, with airtight lids, these are ideal for storing liquids or semi-solid foods, such as casseroles and stewed fruit. They are also the best solution for freezing items that would get damaged easily in the freezer, such as a pavlova, cream cake or delicate pastry (paste) dish.

Note that when storing liquids or semi-solids, you can simply line the container with a polythene bag before adding the food, then remove the container when the food is frozen. You will need far fewer containers and will make the liquids into neat square or rectangular packs.

In the same way, when freezing a casserole or stew, you can simply line the casserole dish (Dutch oven) with foil, then pour in the cooked food and place the whole thing in the freezer. Remove the foil package from the container when it is frozen and wrap completely in a polythene bag. When ready to reheat it, remove the bag and foil and pop it back into the dish.

Interleaves

These special polythene sheets may be packed between layers of foods, such as chops, pancakes, etc., so they don't stick together. Foil or non-stick baking parchment can be used instead, or foods can be wrapped individually in clingfilm (plastic wrap).

Freezer tape

Tape is useful to seal bags or foil if the shape is awkward, making it difficult to wrap tightly enough, and to seal poorly fitting lids. Different colours are available, which you may use as part of your colour coding. Decorator's masking tape can be used instead of specialist freezer tape – and it's often cheaper!

Yoghurt pots and margarine tubs

Any tough plastic cartons with sealable lids can be used for short-term storage, providing the lids stay firm and they are scrupulously clean before use. If the lids don't fit well, overwrap in foil or a polythene bag or seal with freezer tape.

Toughened glass

Clean instant coffee jars and similar containers can be used to store loose, spoonable

foods, such as breadcrumbs or grated cheese.

Twist ties or clips

Most freezer bags come complete with twist ties. You can buy a variety pack of different coloured ties if you are colour coding your food. Freezer clips may be bought separately and are good for sealing opened bags of free-flow foods, such as peas, but clothes pegs will do instead.

Labels

As we have already seen, it is vital that you mark what the food is, the quantity, the date and any special instructions for when thawed. Ordinary gummed labels won't do, as they won't stand the damp conditions; you must use self-adhesive ones with good sticking power. Freezer labels are widely available. Make sure you stick them on the bag or container when it is completely dry. If it's wet or greasy, they will come straight off!

Other equipment

Blanching baskets

Specialist freezing baskets are expensive and unnecessary. I use a chip basket for most vegetables (except small ones, like peas, for which I have a collapsible vegetable steaming basket). Alternatively, you can use a muslin bag – the sort you would use for straining jellies (clear conserves).

Freezer thermometer

You don't have to have a thermometer, but it is useful to check the temperature inside your freezer from time to time. It should stay at $-18^{\circ}\text{C}/0^{\circ}\text{F}$.

Serrated freezer knives

You don't have to buy special knives as long as your own are strong, good-quality ones. To saw through frozen food needs a rigid knife. A serrated knife will cut fish or baked goods such as whole loaves of bread. For large joints of meat or other tougher jobs, I use a sterilised hacksaw, suitable for cutting thick wood (pour boiling water over the blade before use – and clean thoroughly afterwards).

Removing the air from packages

This is vital to prevent oxidation. When you've put the food in the bag, gently squeeze the bag from the base up so that it fits closely over the food, then hold the bag and tie firmly. Alternatively, tie the bag loosely with a twist tie, insert a drinking straw and suck out the air, then quickly tie it securely without letting any air back in.

For rigid plastic containers, put on the lid, then lift it up at one corner. Press and

squeeze out as much air as possible, then snap the lid shut so that it is sealed completely.

Freezing Principles

The purpose of freezing fresh food is to preserve it for later use. Freezing saves money because you can buy fresh produce such as fruit, vegetables or even meat in bulk (buying a quarter, half or whole animal is much cheaper than a single joint) when it is cheap and in season. It also enables you to enjoy specialities out of season and to make the most of foods on special offer or reduced for quick sale because they are nearing their sell-by date.

Tips for perfect frozen food

- Freeze only top-quality produce. Old, damaged or over-ripe foods will deteriorate quickly and won't improve with freezing.
- Food hygiene is vital. Prepare and freeze raw foods separately from cooked.
- Make sure you, your work surfaces and any containers and utensils used are scrupulously clean.
- Cool cooked and blanched foods for freezing as quickly as possible to room temperature before putting them in the freezer. Keep them covered while they cool.
- Fat deteriorates more quickly than lean meat, so remove all excess before freezing raw meat. Blot surfaces of casseroles or stews with kitchen paper (paper towels) to remove any excess fat or oil and drain fried (sautéed) foods on kitchen paper before cooling and freezing.
- Wrap foods properly and exclude as much air as possible from the packs.
- Don't be tempted to freeze foods that specifically say they are not suitable. There will be a good reason for this: either they will spoil – for example, single (light) cream will curdle on thawing – or they have already been frozen and thawed once (see below). This applies frequently to fish.
- In general, you should never thaw foods and then return them to the freezer without cooking first or you may get food poisoning. There are a few exceptions, however.
- Don't overload your freezer. Chest models have a clearly marked capacity line and food should not be stored above this. If you have an upright model, don't cram foods in until the drawers won't shut properly. If you do, the freezer won't be able to maintain the correct temperature and food will deteriorate. You'll also use far more electricity as the freezer struggles to work properly.
- Keep your freezer free from frost, which will naturally build up inside the cabinet. Use a plastic spatula to scrape off small amounts around the door or lid and when the frost is about 5 mm/1/4 in thick inside, defrost the freezer. If you do not, it can't work properly.

What not to freeze

Most foods can be frozen, although, of course, there is little point in freezing some items – preserved foods, such as pickles, those with a long shelf life, such as dried beans and pasta and so on. But you should not assume that everything else will freeze successfully.

As I have already said, most previously frozen foods should not be frozen. There are exceptions, but as a rule, thawed raw foods need to be cooked before re-freezing. Thawed cooked dishes should not be refrozen – especially those containing meat, fish or poultry.

There are also a few foods that cannot be frozen, because the results are unpalatable.

- **Caviar:** Becomes watery.
- **Cottage cheese:** Becomes watery and chewy.
- **Cream with less than 40 per cent fat content:** Curdles when thawed.
- **Cream cheese with less than 40 per cent fat content:** Goes grainy and watery.
- **Custard:** Only the canned variety will freeze successfully!
- **Egg-based sauces, such as Hollandaise, Béarnaise:** Curdle when thawed.
- **Eggs, in their shells:** Will expand and explode.
- **Eggs, hard-boiled (hard-cooked):** Will go rubbery.
- **Garlic:** Tastes musty when thawed on its own or used in large quantities for flavouring.
- **Jam (conserve):** Tends to become runny – so in a jam sponge, for instance, it will soak into the cake.
- **Jelly (jello) and aspic:** Will crack and go cloudy when thawed.
- **Mayonnaise and mayonnaise-based dressings:** Will separate or curdle when thawed.
- **Pasta, plain, completely cooked:** Becomes unpleasantly soft; may be frozen if undercooked, however.
- **Potatoes, old, boiled:** Become watery. Some varieties will freeze, however – see individual entries.
- **Salad stuffs, such as cucumber, lettuce, radishes:** Will go limp and mushy because of their high water content. Can be frozen if they are prepared for cooking – see individual entries.
- **Yoghurt:** Plain varieties will separate when thawed. Fruit flavours can be frozen, as can yoghurt in a made-up dish.

Emergency freezing – fruit and vegetables

For good results when freezing foods for any length of time, it is vital you follow the preparation instructions in this book. But there will be times when you find that you have some fresh fruit or vegetables you just want to keep for a few days over their use-by date. These can be frozen just as they are, without any special preparation, such as blanching, but only for up to a week.

Ideally, chop or slice them before you freeze. For example, string and slice runner beans, separate cauliflower into florets, shred cabbage, hull strawberries and slice peaches. Place in a plastic bag, foil or a rigid container, seal, label and freeze. Pre-packed fruit and vegetables can be frozen just as they are. When you use them a few days later, they will be a little flabby when thawed, so stew fruits, adding sugar to taste, and cook vegetables from frozen. Don't leave them in the freezer for more than a week or the results will be very disappointing.

Fast freezing

The 'fast freeze' switch works by overriding the thermostat so the temperature drops well below the standard $-18^{\circ}\text{C}/0^{\circ}\text{F}$. Food that is fast frozen will have a better texture because the ice crystals formed in the food will be smaller, so less likely to damage the texture. This is particularly important with delicate foods, like fish. It should always be used if you are freezing a lot of food at once, perhaps if you have spent the day batch baking, or when you buy a quarter of an animal or have a glut of fruit or vegetables to freeze.

Some freezers have a special fast-freeze section. You should use this for freezing your foods initially, then transfer them to other parts of the freezer once hard.

To use the 'fast freeze' facility: If freezing a lot of food, switch it on up to 6 hours before you plan to freeze the food and leave it on for 12–24 hours. For smaller quantities, turn it on 2 hours before freezing and leave it on for 3–4 hours after freezing. **DON'T FORGET** to switch it off when the time is up. (I always put a note on the front of the freezer to remind me).

Thawing and cooking from frozen

For best results is to thaw food as slowly as possible. Thaw items in the fridge rather than at room temperature. If time doesn't allow this, see below for the different techniques.

Once the food has been defrosted, it should be cooked or eaten immediately. **NEVER** leave food lying around once defrosted.

When food is frozen, it inhibits any micro-organisms growing in the food but it doesn't destroy them. So when the food is getting nicely warm again, they come alive and multiply very rapidly. Consequently, to avoid problems, you should always keep food chilled, cook thoroughly as soon as possible, then eat immediately. When cooking and reheating, food must be piping hot throughout to kill the organisms. If

you simply warm it, you are creating a nest of growing bugs!

Slow defrosting in the fridge

Remove foods from the freezer and place in the fridge still in their wrappers.

Make sure you allow plenty of time for thawing – up to 6 hours per 450 g/1 lb of food.

Meat, poultry, fish, juicy fruits and some vegetables may leak as they thaw, so put these items on a plate or in a shallow dish to catch any drips.

Defrosting at room temperature

It is sometimes necessary to thaw at room temperature but there is a danger of impairing the texture and flavour of the food, particularly meat, fish, poultry and game. Bread, cakes and other baked goods will defrost perfectly.

Compared to slow thawing in the fridge, thawing at room temperature cuts the time by about a half, which can be essential if time is short.

To speed the process of thawing meat or poultry up further, place the frozen food in its polythene bag or sealed plastic container in a bowl of cold water or under cold, running water. NEVER put in hot water. Although this method is not ideal, it's better than cooking from frozen.

Defrosting in the microwave

Thawing food in a microwave is quick, economical and hygienic and won't impair the texture or flavour as long as you follow the guidelines below.

Thawing is usually carried out at Medium–low (30 per cent power). Unlike when cooking on Full Power, the timing varies very little whatever the output of your model. You will find specific times for different foods in the second half of the book. The rules for arrangement, size and shape of food apply to thawing and cooking and are also listed under each separate food category.

- Remove any metal twist ties or lids before thawing in the microwave.
- If thawing meat or other foods where you don't want to use the liquid that drips out, place on a microwave rack with a container underneath so the liquid will drip away from the food.
- Thaw in short bursts only, with standing time in between. If you microwave for too long, you'll start to cook the outside.
- Check food before the end of thawing time and remember it will continue to defrost during standing.
- When thawing minced (ground) meat, scrape off the meat as it thaws and remove from the oven. Free-flow mince can be cooked from frozen.
- Break up casseroles, soups or other foods frozen in blocks as soon as possible and move the frozen pieces to the edge.
- Ease pieces of food apart as they thaw to allow more even distribution of the microwaves. This applies to chops, diced meat, sliced bread, bacon rashers (slices), etc.
- If thawing food in a bag, flex the bag occasionally to distribute the microwaves evenly.

- Don't try to defrost whole joints or poultry completely. Start the process in the microwave, then leave at room temperature, wrapped in foil, shiny side in, to finish thawing. Salmonella, a nasty form of food poisoning, can occur if the flesh starts to cook before it is completely thawed. Poultry portions, steaks and chops can be thawed completely by microwaving, however.
- Protect bone ends and thin ends of meat, poultry or fish with tiny strips of smooth foil as they thaw, to protect them from beginning to cook while the rest of the food completes thawing. Don't use large pieces or arcing will occur (sparks that could damage the microwave).
- Put cakes, bread and desserts on a piece of kitchen paper (paper towel) to absorb moisture as they thaw.
- Don't try to defrost cream desserts, such as cheesecakes, completely. Start the process in the microwave, and then let them completely thaw at room temperature.
- Vegetables can be cooked straight from frozen. Bags of frozen peas, for instance, can be cooked in their bag, flexing it now and then to distribute the heat.

Cooking from frozen

Throughout the book you will be told which foods can be cooked from frozen and which must be thawed first. Here's a quick reference guide.

May be cooked from frozen:

- Soups.
- Fish fillets, steaks and small whole fish.
- Shellfish, when added towards the end of cooking a hot dish.
- Chops, steaks, sausages and free-flow minced (ground) meat.
- Stews and casseroles (but they are still better thawed first for a better texture).
- Pasta and rice.
- Vegetables.
- Fruit for stewing, fruit pies and other cooked desserts.
- Bread and rolls (but they are best thawed first).

Do not cook from frozen:

- Any poultry or game birds.
- Joints of meat, especially pork.
- Offal.
- Soufflés.
- Uncooked bread dough or cakes.
- Fruit to be eaten plain in its juice.
- Cooked, made-up dishes (although they can be cooked from frozen if absolutely