



Sending Gifts of Food

It's that time of year when we're thinking about what to send someone we won't be seeing over the holidays. Gifts of food are popular choices, partially because one size fits all.

However, even the convenience of "one size fits all" is a bad investment if the gift is spoiled upon arrival or spoils before it can be properly cared for or consumed. While food shipped by mail-order companies enjoy an excellent safety record, hazards can and do exist. Delays in shipment may allow frozen items to thaw and spoil before reaching their destination. Even if the package arrives safely at the doorstep, unless someone is there to take care of it, it may still spoil before it is discovered.

You can protect yourself against these mishaps by knowing what to look for when sending or receiving gifts of food. USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline recommends the following safety tips when sending and receiving perishable items.

If you're ordering a gift to be sent from a mail-order company, ask how the gift will be packaged and mailed. It should be packed in foam or heavy corrugated cardboard. If it's perishable, it needs to be packed ice cold or frozen with a cold source, such as dry ice or a frozen gel pack. It also should be labeled "Keep Refrigerated" and mailed with overnight delivery.

Make sure any mail-order item of an unusual nature comes with storage and preparation instructions. Nothing is worse than to open a package from Aunt Millie that you know is food, but you're not sure if it's safe or even what to do with it.

If you're packing your own perishable food gift, freeze the food solid first, then pack as recommended above for mail order companies. Be sure to fill any empty spaces in the packing box with crushed paper or foam "popcorn." Airspaces encourage thawing. Also, label: "Perishable—Keep Refrigerated."

Regardless of how food is sent, alert the recipient of the expected delivery date so they or a neighbor can be home to receive the gift. Otherwise it may sit unsafely on the doorstep or at the post office for hours or even days. Don't have perishable items delivered to an office unless you know it will arrive on a work day and refrigerator space is available for keeping it cold.

If you receive a food item marked "Keep Refrigerated," open it immediately and check its temperature. Ideally, the food should arrive frozen or partially frozen with ice crystals still visible or at least refrigerator-cold to the touch. If the food is thawed it should be at or less than 40 degrees internal temperature.

If perishable food arrives warm, notify the company if you think you or the sender deserves a refund. Do not consume the food. Remember, however, it's the shipper's responsibility to deliver perishable foods on time; it's the customer's responsibility to have someone at home to receive the package.

Refrigerate or freeze perishable items immediately upon receipt. Even if a product is partially defrosted, it's generally safe to refreeze, although there may be some loss in quality.

Keep your family's foods and those you send friends and family safe during the holiday. Remember to keep perishable foods frozen when sending them.

For more information check the University of Wyoming Extension Nutrition and Food Safety website at www.uwyo.edu/foods.

Wyoming Food Safety Coalition training members are from Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service; Wyoming Department of Agriculture; and City/County Health Departments.