



Choose the Right Containers – and Location - When Storing Food at Home

It is OK to store leftovers in a container that once held whipped topping? Can you reheat foods in carry-out Styrofoam containers? We know that milk should be refrigerated, but what about an open bottle of salad dressing? Follow these tips for choosing the correct containers – and location – when storing food at home.

Choose the Right Food Storage Container

- **Use only food-grade containers for storing food.** Food-grade containers are those containers manufactured especially to hold food, like Ziploc bags or Tupperware containers. Do not use non-food grade containers like plastic or paper shopping bags or plastic trash bags to store food. Chemicals or dyes from these bags can leach into the food and contaminate it.
- **Do not re-use food containers that are hard to clean or may contaminate stored items.** Some food containers are hard to clean or have hard-to-clean lids; plastic water bottles and yogurt containers are good examples. Even though these containers originally held food (or water), they are hard to clean and should not be re-used. Other single-use items that should not be reused are disposable plastic utensils, plates and cups, Styrofoam trays or take-out containers, and plastic containers from cottage cheese, sour cream, chip dip, whipped topping, margarine and milk.
- **Use single-use wooden items only once.** Some wooden food-related items, such as popsicle sticks and shish kabob skewers, are intended for one-time use. If you want to reuse shish kabob sticks, buy the metal ones. Rather than reuse popsicle sticks, purchase one of the containers for making popsicles that comes with reusable handles. Or, use a new purchased popsicle stick every time.
- **Take care when choosing containers for reheating.** Numerous research studies have shown that using the wrong type of container when heating food in a microwave oven can transfer harmful chemicals into the food. Choose glass or microwave-safe plastic containers, or white paper plates for microwave heating. Do not reuse plastic food containers from margarine, cottage cheese, or similar foods for microwave heating. Do not use Styrofoam or take-out containers in a microwave oven. Some ceramic pottery dishes are microwave safe; check the bottom of bowls, cups and plates for information on safe heating in these dishes.

Store Perishable Foods in the Refrigerator or Freezer

- **Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products** (milk, cheese, yogurt, etc) are perishable foods that spoil easily. These foods (raw or cooked) should be stored in the refrigerator. But don't expect the refrigerator to prevent spoilage altogether. For longer periods of time, meat, poultry, fish and most cheese can be wrapped in aluminum foil or placed in a freezer bag and stored in the freezer.
- **Most fruits and vegetables** will benefit from storage in the refrigerator. To help prevent foodborne illness, always store cut or sliced melons (watermelon, cantaloupe, honeydew) in the refrigerator or on ice. A few fruits and vegetables - especially bananas, avocados, tomatoes, onions and sweet potatoes – will soften and turn brown if stored in the refrigerator, so store these at room temperature until you are ready to cook with them. Once cut, peeled, or cooked, store all fruits and vegetables in the refrigerator.
- **Store cooked or prepared foods in the refrigerator.** If you open a can of peaches, or prepare macaroni and cheese using a box mix, always store the leftovers in the refrigerator. Any leftover canned stew, baked beans, pasta meals, and other similar items should always be refrigerated.
- **Store opened bottles of dressings and sauces in the refrigerator, if recommended.** Check the label on opened bottles of salad dressing, ketchup, and similar items. If the label says 'Keep Refrigerated,' then follow package directions for both quality and safety.
- **Avoid storing food too long.** Some harmful bacteria can grow, even in the refrigerator. Periodically check dates on luncheon meats, hot dogs, and dairy products to make sure you are consuming these items before the 'Use By' date.
- If you are not sure how to store an unopened package or bottle, consider how the item was stored at the market. If you purchased the food item from the refrigerator case, or if it was stored on ice, there is a good chance that the food should be refrigerated once you get it home.

There are some excellent online resources to help guide your food storage decisions.

Cupboard, Refrigerator, and Freezer Storage Charts (Kansas State) found online at:

<http://www.oznet.k-state.edu/humannutrition/hrap/storage/stochart.htm>

Storing Vegetables and Fruits at Home (Washington State University) found online at:

<http://cru.cahe.wsu.edu/CEPublications/eb1326/eb1326.pdf>