

Mailing Foods

Everyone loves getting packages in the mail. Sometimes they are gifts of food, either homemade or from mail order. When it is baked goods or shelf-stable canned items, the lucky recipient usually knows how to tell about its safety and what to do with it. What about smoked turkeys, cheese and sausage gift packs, and other perishable items? Whether you are giving or receiving, there are some food safety tips you need to keep in mind for these special gifts.

TIPS FOR THE PURCHASER

Speedy Delivery: Ask the company how the food will be mailed. If it is a perishable item, it should be delivered as quickly as possible, ideally overnight. Make sure perishable items and the outer package are labeled "Keep Refrigerated" to alert the recipient.

Storage and Preparation Instructions: Will the food item come with storage and preparation instructions? Some mail order food gift items are of an unusual nature and some consumers may not know how to handle or prepare them.

Arrange a Delivery Date: Tell the recipient if the company has promised a delivery date. Or alert the recipient that "the gift is in the mail" so that they or a neighbor can be home to receive it. Otherwise it may sit unsafely on the front porch or at the post office for hours or even days. Do not have perishable items delivered to an office unless you know it will arrive on a work day and there is refrigerator space available for keeping it cold.

TIPS FOR THE RECEIVER

Check the Temperature: When you receive a food item marked "Keep Refrigerated," open it immediately and check its temperature. Optimally, the food should arrive frozen or partially frozen with ice crystals still visible, or at least, refrigerator cold to the touch. If perishable food arrives warm, notify the company if you

think you deserve a refund. Do not consume the food. Remember that it is the shipper's responsibility to deliver perishable foods on time and the customer's responsibility to have someone at home to receive the package.

Keep it Cold: Refrigerate or freeze perishable items immediately. Even if a product is partially defrosted it is safe to freeze it, although there may be a slight loss of quality.

TIPS FOR THE MAIL-IT-YOURSELF-ER

Pack it Safely: Perishable foods will stay at a safe temperature longest if frozen solid first. When it is frozen, pack your food gift with a cold source such as a frozen gel pack or purchased dry ice.

Use a Sturdy Box: Pack your frozen food and cold source in a sturdy box, such as heavy foam or corrugated cardboard. Fill up any empty space with crushed paper or foam "popcorn." Air space in the box will cause the food and cold source to thaw faster.

Label it Perishable: Your package should be clearly labeled "Perishable – Keep Refrigerated." As in "Tips for the Purchaser," above, arrange a delivery date with the recipient. Ship your package by overnight delivery.

Source:
USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. *Mail Order Food Safety*. October 1994.

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University.

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