

Safe Handling of Cheese

Everyone has favorite cheeses among the great variety available. Cheese comes in many forms ranging from soft to hard. Recommendations for storage and handling of cheese will depend on the type of cheese. The following list will help identify the type of cheese to know how it should best be handled.

- **Soft:** Brie, Camembert, Cottage Cheese, Cream Cheese, Feta, Mascarpone, Neufchatel, Ricotta
- **Semisoft:** American, Asiago, Baby Swiss, Blue, Brick, Gorgonzola, Havarti, Limburger, Monterey Jack, Mozzarella, Muenster
- **Firm:** Edam, Gouda, Provolone
- **Hard:** Cheddar, Colby, Colby Jack, Gruyere, Parmesan, Romano, Swiss
- **Specialty Cheese:** Pasteurized Process Cheese, Cold Pack

Bring out the best in flavor and texture of your favorite cheese by following these tips on storing, cooking and serving cheese.

HOW SHOULD CHEESE BE STORED?

Cheese should be refrigerated at temperatures of 35 to 40 °F in the original wrapping until ready to use. Store cheese out of the airflow in the cooler so it doesn't pick up off-flavors common in all refrigerators. If the original wrap is removed, re-wrap cheese tightly with plastic film wrap or foil to prevent air pockets. Once cheese is exposed to air, mold and dehydration may occur. To protect cheese from mold, always work with it in a clean area. It will keep better if re-wrapped with new plastic wrap after each time opened. To be extra cautious, double-wrap the cheese or place it back in its

original container or a sealed container, if possible. Strong-smelling cheeses like Limburger should be well-wrapped and kept in a separate container to prevent odors from transferring to other foods.

HOW LONG IS IT SAFE TO KEEP CHEESE?

Soft cheeses should be eaten soon after purchasing. As a general rule, the harder the cheese, the longer it will remain fresh. But remember, natural cheese will continue to ripen, no matter how carefully it is stored. Hard cheeses will generally keep for several months, whereas softer cheeses will keep from one to three weeks after opening, if stored in an airtight container. In addition, large pieces of cheese tend to keep longer than shredded cheese.

Process cheese slices are best if used within six months when stored in the original package at a constant 32 °F. Opened packages re-wrapped tightly and stored between 30 °F and 40 °F are best if used within three to four weeks. Frozen packages opened and re-wrapped tightly, and stored at 0 °F or below, are best if used within six to eight weeks.

The "best if used by" date is intended to tell you how long the product will retain best flavor or quality. The term is not a safety date. "Best if used by" dates are intended as useful guidelines. Some foods may deteriorate more quickly and other foods may last longer than the times suggested. A number of factors can shorten the useful life of a food product, such as improper handling and inadequate storage. Food products may be consumed after the "best if used by" date if the product has been properly stored and handled.

IF CHEESE GETS MOLDY, SHOULD IT BE THROWN AWAY?

Mold may develop on the surface of cheese. Although most molds are harmless, to be safe, cut away a half inch of cheese on all sides of the visible mold. Use remaining cheese as quickly as possible.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO MELT CHEESE?

Cheese cut into small pieces or shredded promotes more even melting in a shorter amount of time. When you add cheese to any recipe, cook on low heat, stirring constantly. High heat will toughen cheese and make it stringy. When you are making a sauce with cheese in it, add cheese as the last ingredient and heat until just melted. Processed cheese melts more smoothly than natural cheese.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO MICROWAVE CHEESE?

Remove the cheese wrapper and place on a microwave-safe plate. Microwave at 30 percent until cheese reaches desired softness and/or temperature. Check every 10 seconds to prevent overheating. Cooking times will vary among microwave ovens. Use this method to prepare cheese nachos without making the cheese tough.

WHAT IS THE BEST TEMPERATURE FOR SERVING CHEESE?

The flavor of cheese is best when eaten at room temperature, so remove from refrigerator one to two hours in advance of serving time. Soft cheeses take a shorter amount of time to come to room temperature than firm and hard cheeses. However, it is best to set out only the amount of cheese you will eat to prevent the cheese from becoming dry and tough from being repeatedly warmed and chilled.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO SHRED CHEESE?

Cheese will shred more easily if well-chilled; it can also be placed in the freezer for 30 minutes before shredding.

CAN YOU MAKE CHEESE LAST LONGER BY FREEZING IT?

Most hard cheeses and process cheeses can be frozen, however, there will be changes in texture. For this reason, thawed cheese is best used crumbled or shredded, in salads or as toppings or in uncooked dishes.

TIPS FOR FREEZING CHEESES:

- Freeze pieces of a half-pound or less.
- Use moisture-proof and airtight wrapping.
- Freeze quickly and store at 0 °F for two to six months.
- Thaw in refrigerator so cheese won't lose moisture; the slower the cheese is thawed, the better.
- Use as soon as possible after thawing.

WHAT IS PASTEURIZED PROCESS AMERICAN CHEESE?

Pasteurized process American cheese is a blend of fresh and aged natural cheese (such as cheddar, colby, etc.) that has been melted, pasteurized and mixed with an emulsifier according to the FDA's Standard of Identity. Pasteurized process cheese is milder in flavor and softer in body than the natural cheese from which it was made and has good melting properties.

SOURCES:

1. American Dairy Association. *I Love Cheese!* [WWW document]. URL <http://www.ilovecheese.com/about/abfaq.html>
2. USDA (1998) *Cheese, American, Pasteurized Process-Sliced* [WWW document]. URL <http://www.usda.gov/fcs/commodities/a12b.htm>

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