

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Heading out to the beach, or just up the road for a picnic? Or is it a longer trip to visit relatives in the next state? Whatever the reason, summer is when we are most likely to pack some food in the cooler and go somewhere else. It also happens to be when that back seat or picnic site is more likely to be hot, and when the food will spoil faster. So, how do you pack the cooler to keep food safe the longest time?

Let's start with the cooler itself. Foam coolers are very good insulators. They just happen to be fragile. Unless you are able to protect them from twists and bumps, you may end up with a cracked cooler and a puddle underneath it. Plastic or metal coolers can take the wear and tear, but they can be very heavy when filled. Maybe you want one of each.

Having two coolers is actually a very good idea. Fill one with the drinks, sodas or water. That's the one people will be in and out of most frequently. Keep it handy and labeled so they know which one to open. If you have small children at the picnic, stick a can or bottle to that cooler, so that they recognize which one to open. The fewer hands in a cooler, the colder it will stay.

If you are taking peanut butter crackers, chips or fruit that doesn't need to be kept cold, put those in a separate container, so that the cooler stays closed as much as possible. Nuts, dried fruit, and meat jerky are other good before-meal snacks that don't need to be kept cold.

Then put the more perishable foods in the other cooler. This one should stay

closed as long as possible. Pack the food in reverse order from how you expect to use it. If the first thing you want out will be the deviled eggs, they go in last. If you won't grill the burgers until the last minute, they go in first, on the bottom.

Wrap each food or dish separately in leakproof wrappers. You can use plastic zipper freezer bags, resealable box containers, or plastic dishes with snap-lock lids. If some things are raw (burgers, fish), one bag inside another, both sealed tightly is a good idea.

If you're taking enough for two days, or two meals, freeze the foods for the second one. Chicken or hot dogs packed frozen will stay cold longer, and be thawed by the time you're ready to use them.

Since blocks of ice stay cold and frozen much longer than cubes, plan ahead. Fill half gallon milk or juice cartons or plastic jugs about three quarters full of water and freeze them. Use these to pack around the food, and just fill in the spaces with cubes. If plastic jugs remain sealed and no food juices can leak into them, you'll be able to drink the ice water the next day.

A full cooler stays cold longer. If there's still space after you have all the food in, add more ice. Or put some of the non-perishable food, such as a loaf of bread or pack of rolls, that won't be used immediately in to fill up the space. Refrigerate it early, so that it's cold before it goes in the cooler. That way it won't warm things or melt ice.

Finally, after the picnic, check the ice situation before you decide if you're keeping the leftovers. If there is still plenty of ice, and the food has not been out and warm for more than two hours, you can safely keep it. But if the ice is gone, or if the food has been sitting on the table for more than two hours, throw it away. Why spoil a great day with food poisoning that night?

Here's a good vegetable dish for grilling, at the beach or on the back patio. Mix the sauce ahead of time and take it along in a small jar. If you prefer more flavor, add ½ teaspoon of Italian seasoning. Slice the tomatoes when you're ready to grill them.

Grilled Tomato Marinade

1 tsp minced garlic

1 Tbsp minced onion

2 Tbsp olive oil

1 ½ Tbsp raspberry vinegar

2 large ripe tomatoes

salt and cracked pepper to taste

Combine garlic, onion, oil and vinegar in small jar. Wash and slice tomatoes ½ inch thick. Lay tomatoes on a baking sheet or plate and drizzle sauce over them. Grill on medium heat for 1 minute each side, adding last of sauce when you turn the slices.

Serves 4. (Source: Fresh from Florida, FL DACS)

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