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## Frozen Extras

Have you ever found a package of meat in the back of the freezer and wondered how long it has been there? Maybe a bag of corn or peas that are now one solid frozen brick? Did you use them, or throw them out?

In most cases frozen food will be *safe* to use, for as long as the freezer is on and the food stays frozen. Once food has been frozen no bacteria are going to grow, and they are what would make it unsafe. So a 2 year old package of chicken legs will be perfectly safe if the freezer has never been off for more than a hour or two.

That does not mean however that the food will taste great! We want food to taste and feel good, as well as be safe. Those are quality factors. Safe food might not taste good, and unsafe food might taste just fine. After all, not many people who get food poisoning deliberately ate something they thought was bad! You might not want to serve those 2 year old chicken legs for Sunday dinner, but they would be fine for chicken stew.

The *quality* of frozen food depends on many factors. Vegetables that were not properly blanched (partly cooked) before they were frozen often end up tasting like grass. They're safe, but who wants corn that tastes like hay? Commercially frozen fruits and vegetables have all been blanched, so their flavor won't change. But they might get freezer burn.

Many people blame freezer burn on poor packaging or wrapping. In truth, much of the blame for freezer burn belongs to the kind of freezer the food is in. Deep freezers keep better quality than refrigerator freezers. And much as we hate to have to defrost a

freezer, automatic defrost freezers cause more freezer burn. The more often a freezer door is opened, the faster the food will get freezer burn.

Also, food with lots of fat does not keep as well. So ground beef might get a strong flavor sooner than a beef roast, even if they're kept in the same freezer. Finally, salt mixed with fat makes it taste strong and rancid even faster. That's why bacon and ham should only be frozen for a few months. The longer it's frozen, the stronger the off-flavor will get.

So, when you find that long-lost package of frozen meat or vegetable, don't automatically throw it out. It is most likely completely safe. Thaw it in the refrigerator, then smell it and look for freezer burn. Then decide if you want to serve it for dinner or hide it in chili or stew.

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