

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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They Just Don't Make Them Like They Used To!

Whether you're talking about alarm clocks or slabs of bacon, it's true. They just don't make them like they used to! And while you might not notice the difference, the changes make a big difference in what you need to do to keep food safe.

Take bacon for instance. Old fashioned bacon and ham were made by a long slow process. The meat was first cured by packing in salt or soaking in a strong salt brine. This curing could take as long as a month, with frequent turning, adding more salt or draining away water. Finally, when the salt had soaked the whole way in to the center of the piece, the meat could be smoked. This was another long slow process, keeping a slow smoky fire burning under the meat until it was dark and you could taste the smoke the whole way through the piece.

These long slow processes did more than add flavor. They took a lot of water out of the meat and added a lot of salt. Salt is the world's oldest preservative. If there's enough salt no molds, yeast or bacteria will grow. Smoke is also a preservative. The tars from the smoke will kill bacteria too. If anything new floated past in the breeze and landed on the meat, there was enough salt and smoke to keep it from growing. That's how our ancestors could keep meat for more than a few days. This meat could last for months or years without refrigeration!

Today, very few processors have time for such long, slow procedures. You can still get a 'Country' ham, and pay a steep price for it, but they are not common. People

who get them often don't realize how salty they are. They try to cook them like a 'modern' ham. They've never heard of soaking and boiling a ham or bacon before cooking it. Then I get calls about how to use such a dry, salty piece of meat!

How are bacon and hams made today? If you look closely on most labels, you'll find the words "water added". That's how the flavor is added. A solution of salt, flavors and liquid smoke is injected into the meat. Instead of 8 weeks, now 8 needles (or more) are used. There might be a short curing time, but it is much shorter than the old-fashioned way.

This quick way of making bacon and ham changes the final product. The meat is softer and moister. It's not as salty, easier to cook and eat. But there's a possible problem. If the needles used to inject the salt water happened to be contaminated, they could put bacteria right into the middle of the piece of meat.

But that extra moisture means that it's easier for molds and bacteria to grow. You don't have to soak and boil it first, but you do need to keep it in the refrigerator. Even refrigerated bacon and ham spoils, sometimes within a couple of weeks. You might notice that the meat seems slimy or slippery. Maybe you'd notice a strange odor or blue or green spots. These are signs that something is growing there. Uh Oh!

Some of the bacteria that can tolerate the salt make toxins when they grow, even though you might not notice any visible changes. While cooking the meat well will kill the bacteria the heat won't be enough to destroy the toxins. So you could still get pretty sick. If you notice any slime, any strange colors or smells, don't risk it, pitch it.

If a package of bacon or a ham is too much for you to use within a week, repack it. As soon as you open the package divide it into several smaller packages. Make

each one as much as you can use in one week. Freeze all but one. Then thaw them out as you need them. Bacon and ham will keep, frozen for several weeks before the flavor starts to change. But at least you'll know that the meat is safe.

Here's a favorite salad that helps you use a little of that bacon before it spoils. Be sure to drain it well on paper towels to remove as much fat as possible.

Broccoli Raisin Salad

1 head broccoli, trimmed	1/4 C chopped onion
1/4 C raisins	1/4 C equivalent low-calorie sweetener
1 C low-fat mayonnaise or salad dressing	2 Tbsp cider vinegar
1/4 C chopped pecans	4 slices low-fat turkey bacon

Cook bacon until crisp, then drain well on paper towels. Crumble. Cut broccoli into bite-sized pieces. Combine broccoli, onion and raisins in large bowl. Combine salad dressing, sugar substitute and vinegar in small bowl. Mix until smooth. Add to broccoli and toss until coated. Cover and refrigerate until ready to serve. Stir in pecans and crumbled bacon just before serving. Serves 8.

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