



** This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at <https://ksre-learn.com/storing-holiday-food-leftovers>

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K-State food scientist shares tips for safe leftovers

Whether refrigerating or freezing leftovers, follow these steps to keep your family safe

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – In the movies, many sequels just don't live up to the originals.

But where holiday foods are concerned, many people actually look forward to follow-up meals, says Kansas State University food scientist Karen Blakeslee.

"Leftovers are a great option for a quick lunch or dinner," said Blakeslee, who also is coordinator of the university's [Rapid Response Center for Food Science](#), "but how those leftovers are managed can make a difference in the safety of the food."

Blakeslee said hot leftovers need to be divided into small containers to allow faster cooling. She suggests containers that are about two inches in depth. Plan ahead and use containers that can be stored in the freezer. Chill the food in the refrigerator, then freeze it for later use.

"Never place a large container of hot food – such as soup – into the refrigerator because it will cool down very slowly," she said. "This can allow bacteria that may be present to multiply and increase the chance of foodborne illness."

To speed up the chilling process, Blakeslee said the smaller containers can be placed into an ice water bath. "Always store leftovers within two hours after cooking," she said.

Leftovers can be kept safely in the refrigerator for 3-4 days, or frozen for 3-4 months. Frozen leftovers are safe indefinitely, Blakeslee said, but can lose moisture and flavor when stored longer than 3-4 months.

Re-heating leftovers depends on the food, according to Blakeslee.

"Microwave ovens make it easy and quick to reheat leftovers, but for even heating, always rotate containers or stir the food during reheating," she said. "Also, allow the lid or wrap to vent steam as it heats."

For added safety, use a food thermometer to assure that the reheated food reaches an internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit. After heating, let the food rest; Blakeslee said heat is still rising within the food after heating it in the microwave.

“If leftovers are frozen, it is best to thaw them in the refrigerator before heating,” she said. “It is safe to reheat frozen leftovers without thawing, either in a saucepan or microwave, in the case of a soup or stew.”

Casseroles, combination meals and similar foods can be reheated in the oven or microwave, according to Blakeslee. Reheating will take longer than if the food is not thawed first, but Blakeslee said it is safe to do when time is short.

What about leftovers that are leftover? “It is safe to refreeze any food remaining after reheating previously frozen leftovers to the safe temperature of 165 F, as measured with a food thermometer,” Blakeslee said.

More tips on safely saving leftovers is [available online from the U.S. government’s Food Safety and Inspection Service](#).

More food safety tips are available online from K-State’s [Rapid Response Center for Food Science](#). Blakeslee publishes a monthly newsletter, called [You Asked It!](#), with timely tips for safe food in and out of the home.

More information is also available at [local extension offices in Kansas](#).

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story

Rapid Response Center for Food Science (Kansas State University), <https://www.rrc.k-state.edu>

Leftovers and Food Safety (U.S. Food Safety and Inspection Service), <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/leftovers-and-food-safety>

You Asked It! food safety newsletter, <https://www.rrc.k-state.edu/newsletter/index.html>

K-State Research and Extension statewide locations, <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html>

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