

# THAWING

Raw or cooked meat, poultry, egg products, and other perishable foods must be kept at a safe temperature while thawing. Food stored constantly at 0 °F will always be safe. However, as soon as they begin to thaw and become warmer than 40 °F, bacteria that may have been present before freezing can begin to multiply.

Perishable foods should never be thawed on the counter or in hot water and must not be left at room temperature for more than 2 hours. Even though the center of the food may still be frozen as it thaws on the counter, the outer layer of the food could be in the "Danger Zone," between 40 °F and 140 °F — temperatures where bacteria can quickly grow.

There are 3 safe ways to thaw food: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave. Foods can also be cooked from the frozen state.

## **Refrigerator Thawing**

When thawing frozen food, it's best to plan ahead and thaw in the refrigerator where it will be at a constant temperature of 40 °F or below. Planning ahead is the key to this method because of the lengthy time needed. For example, a pound of ground meat or boneless chicken breasts requires a full day to thaw.

After thawing in the refrigerator, items such as ground meat, stew meat, poultry, and seafood should remain safe and good quality for an additional 1 or 2 days before cooking. Red meat cuts (such as beef, pork, or lamb roasts, chops, and steaks) are safe for 3 to 5 days. Food thawed in the refrigerator can be refrozen without cooking, although there may be some loss of quality.

## **Cold Water Thawing**

This method is faster than refrigerator thawing but requires more attention. The food must be in a leak-proof package or plastic bag. If the bag leaks, bacteria from the surrounding environment could be introduced into the food. Also, the meat may absorb water, resulting in a watery product.

The bag should be submerged in cold tap water, changing the water every 30 minutes so it continues to thaw. Small packages (about 1 pound) of meat, poultry, or seafood may thaw in an hour or less. A 3 to 4-pound package may take 2 to 3 hours.

If thawed completely, the food must be cooked immediately. Foods thawed by the cold water method should be cooked before refreezing.

## **Microwave Thawing**

When thawing food in the microwave, always cook immediately afterwards because some areas of the food may have become warm, which would allow bacteria to grow. Foods thawed in the microwave should be cooked before refreezing.

## **Cooking Without Thawing**

When there is not enough time to thaw frozen foods, just remember that it is safe to cook foods from the frozen state. Cooking times will take longer for frozen foods that are not thawed first.