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Nebraska Extension – Buffalo County
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November 29 - Throw Out Your Leftovers Day!

There are limits on how long leftovers can be kept safely. Leftovers can be kept in the refrigerator for 3 to 4 days or frozen for 2 to 4 months. If frozen longer leftovers can lose moisture and flavor.

There are three ways to safely thaw leftovers: in the refrigerator, with cold water, and in the microwave oven. Refrigerator thawing will take the longest, but the leftovers stay safe the entire time.

Cold water thawing is faster than refrigerator thawing but requires more attention. The frozen leftovers must be in a leak-proof package or plastic bag. If the bag leaks, water can get into the food and bacteria from the air or water could contaminate it. Leftovers thawed by cold water should be cooked before refreezing.

Microwave thawing is the fastest method. When thawing leftovers in a microwave, continue to heat the food until it reaches 165° F as measured with a food thermometer. Leftovers thawed in the microwave can be refrozen after heating to this safe temperature.

It is also safe to reheat frozen leftovers without thawing. Reheating will take longer but it is safe to do when time is short.

When reheating leftovers, be sure they reach 165° F on a food thermometer. Reheat sauces, soups, and gravies to a rolling boil. Cover leftovers to retain moisture and to ensure that the food heats all the way through.

When reheating in the microwave, cover and rotate the leftovers for even heating. Arrange food evenly in a covered microwave safe dish and add liquid, if needed. Be sure the

covering is microwave safe and vent the lid or wrap to let some steam escape. The moist heat that is created will help destroy harmful bacteria and ensure uniform cooking. Also, because microwaves have cold spots, check the temperature of the food in several places with a food thermometer and allow a resting time before checking the internal temperature of the food with a food thermometer. Cooking continues for a longer time in dense foods such as a whole turkey or beef roast than in less dense foods like breads, small vegetables, and fruits.

It is safe to refreeze any food remaining after *reheating* previously frozen leftovers to the safe temperature of 165° F on a food thermometer.

If a large container of leftovers was frozen and only a portion of it is needed, it is safe to thaw the leftovers in the refrigerator, remove the needed portion and refreeze the remainder of the thawed leftovers without reheating it.

For more information about leftovers contact Nebraska Extension in Buffalo County, 1400 East 34th Street, Kearney, or call (308) 236-1235.