

Freezing Without Freezer Burn

Your freezer is the best money-saver in your kitchen. It lets you buy the family pack, the markdown, the holiday turkey, and cook it when you're ready. But only if what comes out is as good as what went in.

The USDA says food kept at 0°F stays safe indefinitely. The clock in a freezer is about **quality**, not safety. Wrap it right and quality lasts a long time. Wrap it wrong and you get freezer burn.

What freezer burn is

Freezer burn is those dry, grayish-brown, leathery spots on frozen meat. It happens when air reaches the surface and dries it out. The USDA says freezer burn does not make food unsafe. It just makes those spots dry and tasteless. You can cut them off before or after cooking.

I learned about freezer burn the hard way as a young man. I froze a nice rump roast in the store tray and forgot it for most of a year. When I thawed it, the whole outside was dry and gray. I trimmed off nearly a third of it. Mr. Albers asked me what I'd paid for the part in the trash. I told him. He said, "Then you paid for air."

Store wrap is fine, but only for a short while

The USDA says it's safe to freeze meat right in its supermarket package. But that thin plastic lets air through. If you'll use it within a month or two, the store wrap is fine. For anything longer, wrap it again.

How I wrap meat for the freezer

- 1 Portion it first.** Decide how much you'll cook at one time. For one or two people, that might be 1 pound of ground meat, 2 chops or 2 chicken thighs. Split big packs into those portions the day you get home.
- 2 Get the air out.** Air is the enemy. Wrap each portion tightly in plastic wrap, pressing the wrap right against the meat.
- 3 Overwrap.** Then wrap it again in heavy-duty foil or freezer paper, or put it in a freezer bag and press out every bit of air you can. A vacuum sealer does this well if you have one, but a freezer bag and some patience work fine.