

SHIPPING FOOD GIFTS

Food products are popular gifts for the holidays, but both giver and receiver need to pay close attention to food safety. Delays in transit can lead to spoilage of perishable foods. Products from a mail-order company, such as fresh and cooked meat, poultry and fish, smoked fish, most canned hams, summer sausage, and cheesecake, probably will be marked “Keep refrigerated”. When receiving a perishable food item, open it immediately and check the temperature.

Perishable mail-order food should arrive frozen or partially frozen with ice crystals still visible. Refrigerate it immediately. Even if a product is smoked, cured, and/or fully cooked, it still is perishable and must be kept cold. If perishable food arrives warm, notify the company. Don't eat or even taste it.

When ordering food products, it's usually best to have them sent to homes instead of to offices, which might not have adequate refrigerated storage. Try to arrange for delivery at a time when the recipient will be home to accept it.

The same guidelines apply when shipping food gifts yourself. While most mail-order companies are well equipped to send perishable foods in packaging that keeps them cold, this may not be possible when doing your own mailing.

If you do ship products requiring refrigeration, use an insulated cooler or a heavy cardboard box with a cold source such as frozen gel packs. Write “Keep refrigerated” on the outside of the package. Put handling instructions on the food itself, too. It's best to specify overnight delivery and to notify the recipient of its expected arrival. Send packages early in the week so that they don't sit in the post office or mailing facility over the weekend.

It may be wise to send nonperishable foods instead, such as quick breads, fruitcakes, cookies, candies, seasoned and candied nuts, dry snack mixes, and seasoning mixtures. Preserved foods such as dried fruits also ship well.

Canned products, including jams and jellies, require careful packaging. Leave screwbands on jars.

Make sure that you use up-to-date laboratory-tested methods for canning products before giving them as gifts. For an extra margin of safety, recipients can boil low-acid home-canned food (meats, fish, poultry, vegetables) for 10 minutes before eating to destroy the bacterial toxin that causes botulism, a deadly foodborne illness.

Safe home-canning procedures haven't been determined for many home-canned products such as mustards. They must be kept refrigerated instead.

Source: Family Food Education Program