

Is the Home-Canned Food Safe to Eat?

- The food that was canned was ripe and firm. Overripe produce may allow bacteria to grow, causing spoilage.
- Up-to-date canning instructions from reliable sources such as USDA and Cooperative Extension were followed exactly.
- The canning times for the foods were not shorter than those recommended by USDA for the size jar and type pack.
- Vegetables, meat, fish, and poultry were processed in a pressure canner.
- If the pressure canner has a dial gauge, it was checked for accuracy the same season the canning was done.
- The pressure canner was vented.
- Fruits, pickles and pickle products, sauerkraut, jam and jelly products were processed in a boiling water bath canner.
- There are no obvious signs of spoilage in the canned food such as a bulging lid, cloudy liquid, or an off odor.
- No mold is growing on the canned food or the surface of the canning liquid.
- The jar is sealed. (The lid is concave and does not move when pressed in the center.)

Reprocessing Home-Canned Foods

Occasionally, something goes wrong in home canning foods and the foods cannot be safely stored at room temperature. The circumstances when home-canned foods cannot be stored safely without further treatment are:

1. The proper processing method was not followed. The following steps must have been followed for food to be safely processed.
 - a. A water bath canner should be used for acid foods. At least 1 inch of water must cover the jars in the water bath. Water must return to a boil before the processing time is counted.
 - b. A pressure canner must be used for low-acid foods (meat, fish, vegetables except tomatoes, and mixtures containing these). Have enough water in bottom of canner (at least 2 inches) to prevent boiling dry. Vent the canner and use correct pressure. Pressure must not fluctuate below desired processing pressure during processing.

2. The pressure canner was not in good working order.
3. The proper processing time was not used.
4. Adjustments were not made for altitudes above 1,000 feet.
5. The jar failed to seal.

If food was processed incorrectly or some of the jars did not seal (and the food looks and smells all right), you can refrigerate, freeze, or reprocess within 24 hours. Reprocessing is a must if you want to store the jar at room temperature.

To refrigerate:

- refrigerate the contents and use within a few days.

To freeze:

- be sure there's enough room in the jar for the food to expand during freezing without breaking the jar, or put the food in a freezer container.

To reprocess:

- use the same jar and check for sealing surface and headspace, or put in a clean hot jar (jar for jar).
- use a new lid.
- re-process for the full recommended time. (For safety, the food must be reprocessed the full time originally recommended for preserving the food.)

It is best to refrigerate or freeze because reprocessing will yield a product of lowered quality.

When To Reprocess

Improperly or underprocessed foods or those that do not seal can safely be reprocessed up to 24 hours after the first processing. After 24 hours, the spore-forming bacteria which were not destroyed may have multiplied, and reached too great a number for the food to be safely reprocessed.

When Not To Reprocess

If a jar of food was sealed when first tested and then later is not sealed, it indicates that spoilage has occurred (exceptions are fermented pickles and sauerkraut). Gas formed during the growth of bacteria causes loss of the seal. Since this indicates spoilage, the contents should be destroyed.

Foods which were underprocessed or improperly processed and held over 24 hours should be destroyed. After that time spoilage organisms in the underprocessed foods may have multiplied to the extent that there are too many bacteria to process safely. Be safe, not sorry, and dispose of improperly processed foods.