A Consumer's Guide to Safely Ordering and Receiving Perishable Food Products From Online Companies

Ordering food products online can be a great way to have special items delivered to your doorstep, or to send as gifts; however, packages containing perishable foods may be exposed to dangerously high temperatures during shipping and delivery. This can lead to the rapid growth of invisible bacteria that can cause foodborne illness and/or faster spoilage. You or the product's recipients can safely enjoy the foods you order by following the recommendations below.

Ordering Products

When ordering perishable food products online, take these simple steps before you checkout and pay:

- Research the company's return policy. Identify who is responsible if the perishable products arrive spoiled or at an unsafe temperature (above 40 ˚F). Some companies have money-back guarantees if something goes wrong with your order. Others insist that they are not responsible for the package or its perishable contents once it leaves their facility. That means that if something goes wrong you could end up paying for very expensive items that are potentially unsafe for anyone to eat.

- Pay special attention to how the items will be shipped (fresh or frozen). When ordering fresh products, choose the fastest delivery option. This will help ensure that the products remain fresh and are safe to eat when they arrive.

- Products shipped with dry ice are more likely to arrive at a safe temperature than those shipped with gel packs. Choose companies that use dry ice to keep the contents of their packages cool/frozen.

If you order perishable meat, poultry, or seafood products as a gift for someone else, be sure to let them know. They need to be aware that you are sending food products that must go directly into the refrigerator or freezer when they arrive. Of course, you also want them to know the expected day of arrival. The last thing anyone wants as a gift is an unsafe or spoiled product.

- Determine whether someone needs to sign for the package when it is delivered. If you have a busy schedule and may not be present when the package arrives, you should contact the company to see if there are other delivery options.

Receiving Products

Do not let the excitement of receiving your package stop you from making sure that the food inside is fresh and safe.

- Open the package immediately. Packages are usually not shipped on refrigerated trucks and contain foods that can spoil. Also, most companies don't require you to be home at the time of delivery, so the package may be left outside your door, even during hot weather. As a result, the food inside the package can reach unsafe temperatures (above 40 ˚F) during shipment and delivery. The longer the food is above 40 ˚F, the faster bacteria will multiply. This increases the risk of making people sick as the result of food poisoning.

Dry Ice

Dry ice is extremely cold and can severely damage skin after just a few seconds of contact. If your package contains dry ice do not touch the ice with your bare hands and keep it away from children and pets. A label (pictured to the right) on the outside of the shipping container is often (but not always) used to indicate that dry ice is inside the package.

To dispose of the dry ice safely, simply leave it in the cooler with the lid opened slightly, and put the cooler outside in a place where children and pets cannot come into contact with it.

Do not put dry ice in drinks, in the toilet, or in a garbage disposal. Do not put it in airtight containers, or on tile, glass, or laminate surfaces.
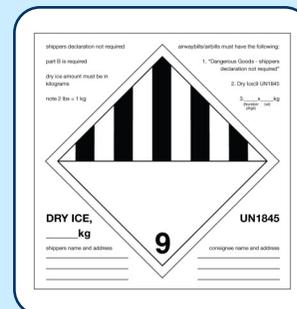
- If frozen items are still frozen hard when they arrive, they are at a safe temperature and can be placed directly in the freezer or in the refrigerator (where they can safely thaw).

- Fresh items, or frozen items that have started to thaw, need special attention. You cannot rely on how a product looks or whether it feels cold to determine its safety. Some companies tell their customers that a food item is safe if it feels "cool to the touch". DO NOT follow that advice! Using a thermometer is the only way to ensure that the products have arrived at a safe temperature. Simply sandwich the thermometer between two items (as pictured) to determine the temperature of the products. The thermometer should read 40 °F or below.

- If any products arrive at an unsafe temperature (above 40 °F), contact the company and follow their instructions to get a replacement or to get your money refunded. DO NOT cook and/or eat these products. Doing so may result in getting sick with a foodborne illness.

- All products that arrive at a safe temperature need to be stored in the refrigerator or freezer until they are ready to be cooked. When storing items in the refrigerator, place them on the bottom shelf with a plate or pan under them to catch any juices that may drip. Recommended safe storage times for perishable food items in the refrigerator and/or freezer can be found at www.foodsafety.gov/keep/charts/storagetimes.html.
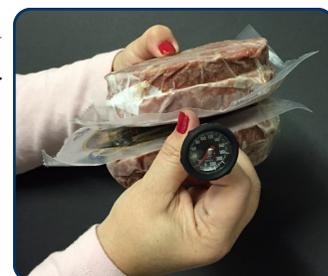
Recommended Safe Internal Cooking Temperatures

Using a food thermometer is the only way to determine if your food is cooked completely and safely.

165 °F - All poultry products including ground chicken and turkey
160 °F - Ground beef, pork, veal, or lamb
*145 °F - All roast, steaks, and/or chops (beef, pork, veal, and lamb) with
a 3-minute rest time, fish*

Contact Dr. Sandria Godwin at Tennessee State University for further information about internet purchases.

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