

News Release

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Guidelines for Safe Mailing of Food Gifts

For many members of the American armed forces, receiving food gifts is a nice reminder of home.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides guidance for safely mailing food gifts to family members and friends serving in the Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard.

"I am sure that in addition to receiving letters from home, our men and women in the armed forces appreciate food gifts," said Susan Conley, director of Food Safety Education for the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service. "It's important to mail food gifts that are not perishable, can tolerate a range of temperatures, and won't break with rough handling."

Perishable foods are those that must be kept at 40 °F or below to remain safe to eat -- meat, poultry, fish, and soft cheeses, for example. These foods cannot be safely left at room temperature for more than two hours, much less for a week or more in the mail. Foodborne bacteria that may be present on these foods grow fastest at temperatures above 40 °F and can double every 20 minutes. When this happens, someone eating the food can get sick.

Food gifts that can be safely mailed include dried products such as jerky and fruits, shelf-stable canned specialties, and regional condiments such as hot sauces. Homemade cookies, candy, and low-moisture breads like fruitcake and bar cookies are also good candidates for mailing.

Some families may wish to send mail order foods. Shelf-stable "summer sausage," cheeses, cakes, and snacks can be ordered on the Internet or through mail order catalogs. Because of the delivery time and distances between the U.S. and duty stations overseas, do not order any food gifts that must be kept refrigerated.

Keep in mind that families and friends must have a specific address for their service members. The U.S. Postal Service will not accept mail addressed to "Any Serviceman."

Here is some advice from the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline concerning food gifts for armed forces serving away from home:

- Dried beef or poultry such as beef jerky, turkey jerky, or beef slims are safe to mail. Bacteria can't multiply in food preserved by removing moisture.
- Dehydrated soups and fruit drink mixes are lightweight and safe to mail. Regional condiments such as hot sauce and Cajun seasonings in packets are useful for spicing up Meals Ready to Eat (MREs).
- Canned specialties such as patè, corned beef, shelf-stable hams, anchovies, shrimp, dips, and cracker spreads make nice treats. Recipients should be cautioned not to use any cans that are damaged or swollen. Do not mail foods in glass containers because the container can break.

- Dense and dry baked goods such as fruitcakes and biscotti are good choices for mailing because they will not become moldy. Other suitable baked goods include commercially-packaged cakes and cookies in airtight tins, dry cookies such as ginger snaps, and specialty crackers.
- High-moisture baked goods such as pumpkin bread should not be mailed because they will most likely mold before delivery.
- Fragile foods like delicate cookies won't make the trip intact. When mailing firm cookies and homemade candies, wrap each piece individually and pack items in commercially popped popcorn or foam packing "peanuts" to help cushion them. Place food gifts in a sturdy box and seal it securely with packing tape.
- Dried fruits such as raisins and apricots, canned nuts and fruit, and commercially-packaged trail mix need no refrigeration.
- Hard candies and firm homemade sweets such as fudge, pralines, and toffee are safe to mail because their high sugar content prevents bacterial growth.

For more information, contact the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at (800) 535-4555 or TTY (800) 256-7072.

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