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Corned Beef and Food Safety

For USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline, the approach of spring usually means that St. Patrick's Day dinner preparations across the country will spark many questions about the safe handling, storage, and preparation of corned beef and all the trimmings. But food safety involves more than the "luck of the Irish."

What is "corning"?

Corning is a form of curing; it has nothing to do with corn. The name comes from Anglo-Saxon times before refrigeration. In those days, the meat was dry-cured in coarse "corns" of salt. Pellets of salt, some the size of kernels of corn, were rubbed into the beef to keep it from spoiling and to preserve it.

Today brining—the use of salt water—has replaced the dry salt cure, but the name "corned beef" is still used, rather than "brined" or "pickled" beef. Commonly used spices that give corned beef its distinctive flavor are peppercorns and bay leaf. Of course, these spices may vary regionally.

Package Dating and Storage Times

Uncooked corned beef in a pouch with pickling juices which has a "sell-by" date or no date may be stored 5 to 7 days in the refrigerator (40 °F or less), unopened. Products with a "use-by" date can be stored unopened in the refrigerator until that date.

Drained and well wrapped, an uncooked corned beef brisket may be frozen for 1 month for best quality. It's recommended to drain the brine because salt encourages rancidity and texture changes. The flavor and texture will diminish with prolonged freezing, but the product is still safe. After cooking, corned beef may be refrigerated for about 3 to 4 days and frozen for about 2 to 3 months for best quality.

Preparation

Corned beef is made from one of several less tender cuts of beef like the brisket, rump, or round. Therefore, it requires long, moist cooking. Keep food safety in mind when preparing corned beef. It can be cooked on top of the stove or in the oven, microwave, or slow cooker.

Corned beef may still be pink in color after cooking. This does not mean it is not done. Nitrite is used in the curing process. This fixes pigment in the meat and affects the color.

Allow the brisket to stand for about 20 minutes after removing from the heat. This will make it easier to slice, and it is best sliced diagonally across the grain of the meat.

Cooking

The USDA does not recommend one particular cooking method as best. Following are methods from various sources. The cooking times are based on corned beef that is not frozen at the time of cooking. "Fork-tender" is a good indication of doneness, but use a food thermometer to be sure. Cook all raw corned beef to a minimum internal temperature of 145°F as measured with a food thermometer before removing meat from the heat source. For safety and quality, allow meat to rest for at least three minutes before carving or consuming. For reasons of personal preference, consumers may choose to cook meat to higher temperatures.

- **OVEN:** Set the oven for 350 °F or no lower than 325 °F. Place brisket fat-side up. Barely cover the meat with water--about 1 inch--and keep the container covered throughout the cooking time. Allow about 1 hour per pound.
- **OVEN COOKING BAG:** Preheat the oven to 325 °F. Add 1 tablespoon of flour to the bag plus 1/2 cup water. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for closing the bag. For a 2 to 3-pound corned beef brisket, cook for 2 1/2 to 3 hours. For a 3 to 5-pound corned beef brisket, cook for 3 to 3 1/2 hours.
- **STOVE:** Place brisket fat-side up in a large pot and cover it with water. Bring the water to a boil; then reduce the heat and simmer, allowing about 1 hour per pound. Vegetables may be added during the last 20 to 30 minutes of cooking. Cook vegetables to desired tenderness.
- **SLOW COOKER:** If using root vegetables such as potatoes and carrots, put them in the bottom of slow cooker. Place brisket on top of vegetables (if using) or in bottom of cooker. Add about 1-1/2 cups of water or enough to cover meat. Cover and cook on high setting for the first hour of cooking. Then cook for 10 to 12 hours on the low setting or 5 to 6 hours on high. Cabbage wedges may be added on top of the brisket during the last 3 hours of cooking.
- **MICROWAVE:** Calculate cooking time at 20 to 30 minutes per pound. Place brisket in a large casserole dish and add 1-1/2 cups of water. Cover with lid or vented plastic wrap and microwave on medium-low (30 percent power) for half the estimated time. Turn meat over and rotate dish. Microwave on high for remainder of time or until fork tender. Vegetables may be added during the final 30 minutes of cooking.

Cooking Ahead

Some consumers prefer to cook corned beef ahead of time. It is easier to cut uniform slices when corned beef is cold. Cooking ahead also makes it easier to reheat and serve later.

After cooking a whole corned beef, cut it into several pieces for faster cooling-or slice it, if you like. Place the beef in small, shallow containers and cool it in the refrigerator quickly.

Leftovers

Any corned beef left over from a meal should be refrigerated promptly-within 2 hours of cooking or reheating. Use cooked-ahead or leftover corned beef within 3 to 4 days or freeze 2 to 3 months. Reheat leftovers to 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer.

Food Safety Questions?

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at **1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)**. The hotline is open year-round



Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish).

Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day.

Check out the FSIS Web site at

www.fsis.usda.gov.

Send E-mail questions to MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov.

Ask Karen!

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7 and a live chat during Hotline hours.



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