

Storing Food Safely

Revised by Nancy Flores and Cindy Schlenker Davies¹

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How many times have you wondered if you've kept food too long and asked, "Is it still all right to eat?" To help you decide whether to keep it or throw it out, here are some simple guidelines and a food storage timetable.

BASIC FOOD STORAGE RULES

- The first rule in handling food is to keep it clean. Before preparing food for storage, wash your hands well and make sure utensils are absolutely clean.
- When shopping, choose cans that are not dented on the seam or rim. In your home, quickly dispose of foods in leaking, bulging, or rusting cans.
- Keep food either hot (above 140°F) or cold (below 40°F). The "danger zone" (45 to 135°F) provides ideal conditions for the growth of common bacteria that can cause spoilage or even food-related illnesses. Never leave food in this danger zone for more than two hours.
- Most importantly, smell—but don't taste—any food you suspect is spoiled. **If in doubt, throw it out!**

CANNED FOODS

In general, most canned foods have a very long "health life" and when stored properly are safe to eat for many years. A product's practical

¹Respectively, Extension Food Technology Specialist, Department of Extension Family and Consumer Sciences; and County Program Director/Extension Home Economist, Bernalillo County Extension Office, New Mexico State University.



The “use by” date found on refrigerated dough products, packaged yeast, and eggs tells you the last day an item should be used before it is likely to lose flavor or quality. This date is determined by the manufacturer of the product. Do not buy or use baby formula or baby food after its “use by” date.

shelf life, however, is tied to proper storage. Although canned foods may be perfectly safe to eat, they may gradually start losing nutrients or flavor, so as a general rule use them within a year. To keep canned foods at their best quality:

- Store in clean, dry, cool cabinets away from the stove, the refrigerator’s exhaust, or other sources of heat.
- Don’t store in cupboards where pipes are located. Leaks can damage food containers.
- Keep in a cool, dark place because prolonged light can affect food color, making it look less appetizing while still safe to eat.
- Always store metal cans off the floor, especially bare concrete. Moisture can wick up the cans and encourage rusting.

CHECK THE LABEL

Product freshness dating on some products can help you decide how long to store them. The “sell by” or “pull” date displayed on dairy products and fresh bakery products is generally the last date the product should be sold, allowing you a reasonable length of time to use the food at home.

The “best if used by (or before)” date used on items with longer shelf lives, such as canned foods, frozen foods, cereals, and fried snack foods, indicates the approximate date when the product quality and flavor will begin to decline. This is not a purchase or a safety date.

FOODS THAT NEED SPECIAL CARE

Take extra precautions with foods that are especially susceptible to bacterial growth—poultry, fish and shellfish, meat, dairy products, puddings, stuffing, and creamed mixtures.

Cover leftover cooked meats and poultry tightly after use and store them in the refrigerator immediately. Use within two days.

Avoid using cracked eggs. If you must use them, make sure they are cooked thoroughly to kill any bacteria that may be in the egg. Do not cool cooked eggs in water on the counter; cool them in cold running water, then refrigerate or use immediately.

For ease of preparation and food safety considerations, cook dressing (stuffing) separately from the chicken or turkey. However, if you decide to stuff poultry, never stuff it the night before you roast it. When refrigerating leftover poultry and stuffing, remove the stuffing from the bird and store in separate containers.

Cook meat and poultry all the way through. Do not cook partially to finish later.

REFRIGERATOR AND FREEZER STORAGE

Set your refrigerator between 34 and 40°F and use a thermometer placed in the refrigerator to alert you to temperature fluctuations. Don’t overload the refrigerator since air must circulate freely to cool all foods evenly. Clean the refrigerator regularly to remove spoiled foods so that bacteria can’t be passed to other foods. Store food in foil, plastic wrap or bags, or

airtight containers to keep food from drying out.

The freezer should be set at 0°F or lower, and a thermometer should be used to monitor freezer temperature, which should not rise above 5°F. Check the thermostat for the proper setting.

To package items for the freezer, especially meat and poultry, remove the product from its original container and rewrap using heavy-duty foil, moisture- and vapor-proof paper, plastic freezer wraps, or freezer containers. Foil may develop holes when folded, causing freezer burn. If necessary, use special freezer tape to ensure airtightness.

Before freezing, label all freezer foods with the date packed, type of food, and weight or number of servings before freezing.

Partially thawed food can be refrozen safely as long as it still has ice crystals and has been held no longer than a day at refrigerator temperatures. Refreezing, however, may cause a loss of quality, so it is best to cook the food and then refreeze it. Combination dishes (pies, stews, and casseroles) that have been thawed should not be refrozen.

PANTRY OR DRY STORAGE

Key points to remember for pantry or dry storage locations are to keep the areas dry, cool, and dark, as well as orderly, clean, and free from insects and rodents. The storage temperature should be kept at about 50°F to maintain food quality, although 60 to 70°F is acceptable. Keep foods in the coolest cabinets in the kitchen, not near the oven, stove, or refrigerator exhaust.

Do not store foods under the kitchen sink or next to household products. Good housekeeping is also a must. Be sure to clean out storage areas periodically and remove crumbs and other food particles that can collect on shelves, in corners, and in cracks. Use metal, glass, and plastic containers with tight-fitting lids to keep out moisture, air, and insects. And remember that using a first-in, first-out inventory system will ensure you use the oldest food items first.



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MAINTAINING FRESHNESS AND QUALITY

To preserve the freshness and quality of food, follow these general principles:

- Buy foods in reasonable quantities. Excess food may be wasted through spoilage.
- Select sound packages of food. Avoid items in torn, dented, or damaged packages.
- Use a first-in, first-out system of rotation and use foods in their order of purchase. Mark foods with purchase date or use label dates.
- Take time to reseal packages for things like cookies, biscuits, and cereals carefully after use.

FOOD STORAGE CHART

Storage times listed in the following table are intended to be useful guidelines, not hard and fast rules. Some foods may deteriorate more quickly and some may last longer than the times suggested. The times will vary depending on growing conditions, harvesting techniques, manufacturing processes, transportation and distribution conditions, nature of the food, and storage temperatures. Remember to buy foods in reasonable quantities and rotate the products in your pantry, refrigerator, and freezer. Trust your own common sense. As a helpful reminder, store this guide in your kitchen or pantry.

Food Storage Timetable				
FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	PANTRY	FREEZER	SPECIAL HANDLING
Breads/cereals/grains: In general, keep cool and dry. For maximum storage time once opened, store in airtight containers. Refrigeration may increase shelf life for some items.				
Bread, rolls (store bought)	5–7 days	3–5 days	2–3 months	Homemade breads may have a shorter shelf life due to lack of preservatives.
Biscuit, muffin mixes		9 months		
Cereals				Cereals should be stored at room temperature in tightly closed containers to keep out moisture and insects.
Ready-to-eat				
(unopened)		6–12 months		
(opened)		2–3 months		
Ready-to-cook oatmeal, etc.		12 months		
Cornmeal	12–18 months	6–12 months		Keep tightly closed. Refrigeration may prolong shelf life.
Flour				Whole wheat flour can be stored in the refrigerator to slow rancidity of the natural oils.
White		6–8 months		
Whole wheat	6–8 months			
Yeast (dry)		Expiration date on package		Keep dry and cool.
Grits		12 months		
Pancake mixes		6–9 months		
Pasta		1–2 years		
Rice				
White		2 years		
Brown	18 months	12 months		
Mixes		6 months		
Refrigerated biscuit roll, pastry and cookie dough	Expiration date on label			
Tortillas				Storage times may vary depending on ingredients. Best if refrigerated once opened. Can be frozen.
Corn, flour	2 weeks	1–2 weeks	2–3 months	
Dairy products: Store in coldest part of refrigerator (40°F), never in door.				
Butter	2–3 weeks		6–9 months	Wrap or cover tightly. Hold only a 2-day supply in keeper.
Buttermilk	10–14 days			Cover tightly. Flavor not affected if buttermilk separates.
Cheese				Keep all cheese tightly packaged in moisture-proof wrap. Do not eat moldy cheese.
Cottage	10–15 days			
Cream, Neufchâtel	4 weeks			

FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	PANTRY	FREEZER	SPECIAL HANDLING
Hard and wax coated				Hard cheese can be frozen but becomes crumbly. Better if grated.
Cheddar, Edam, Gouda, Swiss, brick, etc.				
(unopened)	3–6 months		6 months	
(opened)	2 months			
Parmesan, Romano				Refrigerate after opening for prolonged storage. If cheese picks up moisture, mold may develop.
(unopened)		10 months		
(opened)	2–4 months			
Ricotta	5 days			Refrigerate after opening. Close or wrap tightly.
Process cheese products	3–4 weeks		4 months	
Cream				Cover tightly. Don't return leftover cream to original container. This may spread bacteria to remaining cream. Frozen cream may not whip. Use for cooking.
Half and half, light, heavy	7–10 days		2 months	
(ultra pasteurized, unopened)	21–30 days			
Sour	2 weeks			
Dips (store bought)	2 weeks			
Ice cream, ice milk, sherbet			1–2 months	
Milk				Keep tightly covered. Don't return leftover milk to original container. This may spread bacteria to remaining milk. Frozen milk may undergo some quality change.
Fresh pasteurized and reconstituted nonfat dry milk	1 week (or a few days after sell by date)		1 month	
Evaporated or condensed				
(unopened)		12 months		Invert can every 2 months. Cover tightly.
(opened)	1 week			
Nonfat dry, not reconstituted				
(unopened)	12–18 months	12 months		Refrigeration may prolong quality.
(open)		6 months		
Almond milk*	7–10 days			Shake well before each use.
Rice milk**	7–10 days	Until open		
Coconut milk***	10 days			Cover tightly.
Whipped topping				
In aerosol can	3 months			
From prepared mix	3 days			
Yogurt	10–14 days			Check date on package.
Frozen			2 months	
Note: Thaw all frozen dairy products in refrigerator. Some products may lose emulsion and separate, but are still adequate for cooking.				

FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	PANTRY	FREEZER	SPECIAL HANDLING
Eggs				
Fresh				Store eggs in original carton in coldest part of refrigerator. Uncooked whites can be frozen as they are. To freeze uncooked yolks or whole eggs, add 1/8 teaspoon salt or 1 1/2 teaspoons corn syrup per 1/4 cup (4 yolks or 2 whole eggs). Thaw in refrigerator.
In shell	3–4 weeks		No	
Whites	3 days		12 months	
Yolks (unbroken and covered with water)	2 days		12 months	
Hard cooked	1 week			
Deviled	2–3 days			
Leftover egg dishes	3–4 days			
Fish and shellfish: Refrigerator storage times are for optimal temperature of 32–38°F. Higher temperatures may decrease safe storage times.				
Fish				
Fatty fish				
mackerel, trout, salmon, etc.	1–2 days		2–3 months	For refrigerator, keep wrapped in original wrap. Store in coldest part of refrigerator (32–38°F). Package for freezer in moisture- and vapor-proof wrap.
Lean fish				
cod, flounder, etc.	1–2 days		6 months	Keep solidly frozen at 0°F. Thaw in refrigerator.
Breaded, frozen			3 months	
Shellfish				Refrigerate live clams, scallops, and oysters in container covered with clean, damp cloth—not airtight. Shells will gape naturally, but will close when tapped if alive. If not alive, discard.
Clams				
shucked	1 day		3 months	
in shell	2 days			
Crab				
in shell	2 days			
meat (cooked)	3–5 days		10 months	
Crawfish				
in shell			6 months	
tail meat (cooked)	3–5 days		6 months	
Lobster				
in shell (live)	2 days			
tail meat (cooked)	4–5 days		6 months	
Oysters (shucked)	1 day		4 months	To freeze any uncooked shellfish, pack in moisture- and vapor-proof container. Freeze shucked product in its own “liquor” (liquid) to which water has been added to cover meat.

FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	PANTRY	FREEZER	SPECIAL HANDLING
Shrimp (uncooked)	1–2 days		12 months	Remove heads and freeze shrimp tails in shell. Freeze in water in an airtight container of appropriate size for one meal.
Cooked fish or shellfish	2–3 days		3 months	
Canned fish or shellfish				
(unopened)		12 months		
(opened)	1 day			
Fruit				
Fresh				Do not wash fruit before storing—moisture encourages spoilage—but do wash before eating. Store in crisper or in moisture-resistant bags or wraps. Wrap cut fruits to prevent vitamin loss.
Apples	1 month			
Apricots, avocados, melons, nectarines, peaches, pears	5 days			
Bananas		2–3 days		
Berries, cherries	3 days			
Citrus fruit	2 weeks			
Grapes, plums	5 days			
Pineapple, fresh	2 days			
Canned (all kinds and juices)				Keep tightly covered. Transfer canned fruit to glass or plastic container after opening.
(unopened)		12 months		
(opened)	1 week			
Juices				Keep tightly covered once open to prevent vitamin loss. Transfer canned juice to glass or plastic container after opening.
Fresh	6 days			
Canned (after opening)	6 days			
Frozen				
(concentrated)			12 months	
(reconstituted)	6 days			
Frozen				
(home frozen or purchased frozen)			12 months	Freeze in moisture- and vapor-proof container.
Dried		6 months		Keep cool in airtight container. If foods gain moisture, they may become unsafe and allow bacterial growth. Best if refrigerated after opening.

FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	PANTRY	FREEZER	SPECIAL HANDLING
Meats: Beef, pork, lamb, veal, and game.				
*Fresh, uncooked				Store in colder part of refrigerator (36–40°F). Freeze immediately if not planning to use in a day or two. Wrap in moisture- and vapor-proof wrap for freezing. Label with date and freeze rapidly at 0°F. Freezer storage times for veal may be less. Pork is best if used within 6 months after freezing. Actual storage time of meat depends on the freshness of meat when purchased. *Vacuum-packed fresh meats have a recommended storage time of 2 weeks in the refrigerator.
Chops	2–4 days		6–12 months	
Ground	1–2 days		2–3 months	
Roast	2–4 days		6–12 months	
Sausage	1–2 days		1–2 months	
Steaks	2–4 days		6–9 months	
Stew meat	1–2 days		2–3 months	
Variety meats	1 day		1–2 months	
Casseroles, TV dinners, stews			2–3 months	
Cooked meats (including leftovers)				
Cooked meat and meat dishes	1–2 days		2–3 months	
Gravy, broths	1–2 days		1–2 months	
Cured and smoked meats (including lunch meats)				Keep wrapped. Store in coldest part of refrigerator or in meat keeper. Freezing cured or smoked meats is generally not recommended because salty meats will rapidly turn rancid and lunch meats and hotdogs will weep. Freezing is possible, however, so limited freezer storage times are given. If meats are vacuum packaged, check manufacturer's date.
Bacon	5–7 days		1 month	
Ham (fully cooked)				
whole	5–7 days		1–2 months	
slices	3–4 days			
canned (unopened)	6–9 months			Do not freeze canned hams.
canned (shelf stable, unopened)		2 years		Refrigerate after opening.
country style (unsliced)		12 months		Refrigerate once sliced. Maximum refrigerator storage time is 2–3 months.
(cooked, sliced)	7 days		1 month	
Hotdogs				
(unopened)	2 weeks**		1–2 months	
(opened)	1 week			
Lunch meats				
(unopened)	2 weeks**		1–2 months	
(opened)	3–5 days			

FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	PANTRY	FREEZER	SPECIAL HANDLING
Sausage				
smoked links	7 days		1 month	Freezing alters sausage flavor. Leave frozen no more than 1 month.
dry and semi-dry (like salami)	2–3 weeks			
				**Unopened lunch meats and hotdogs should not be kept more than 1 week after sell by date.
Game birds	2 days		6–12 months	
Venison	3–5 days		6–12 months	
Poultry				
Chicken or turkey				Store in coldest part of refrigerator. Do not let raw juices drip onto other foods For freezing, use moisture- and vapor-proof wrap or container.
Fresh				
whole	2–3 days		1 month	
pieces	2–3 days		6–9 months	
giblets	1–2 days		3–4 months	
Cooked				
leftover pieces	1–2 days		4–6 months	
covered with broth, gravy	1–2 days		6 months	
Canned				
(unopened)		12 months		
(opened)	1 day			
Casseroles, TV dinners			3 months	
Duck, goose	2 days		6 months	
Staples				
Baking powder, soda		8–12 months		Keep dry and covered.
Bouillon cubes, granules		12 months		Keep dry and covered.
Catsup, chili sauce, barbecue sauce				Refrigerate after opening for longer storage time. Will keep for several months.
(unopened)		12 months		
Chocolate				Keep cool.
Pre-melted		12 months		
Semi-sweet		2 years		
Unsweetened		18 months		
Chocolate syrup				
(unopened)		2 years		
(opened)	6 months			Cover tightly and refrigerate.
Cocoa mixes		8 months		Cover tightly.
Coffee				Coffee may remain fresher if refrigerated after opening. Can also be frozen.
Cans				
(unopened)		2 years		
(opened)	4–6 weeks			

FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	PANTRY	FREEZER	SPECIAL HANDLING
(whole bean)	2 months	2 weeks	6 months	
Instant				
(unopened)		1–2 years		
(opened)		2 weeks		
Coffee creamers, nondairy				Keep tightly closed to keep out moisture.
(unopened)		9 months		
(opened)		6 months		
Cornstarch		18 months		Keep tightly covered
Gelatin (all types)		18 months		
Honey		12 months		Cover tightly. If it crystallizes, warm the jar in pan of hot water or heat on low in microwave.
Jams, jellies		12 months		Cover tightly; refrigerate after opening to prolong storage.
Margarine	4–6 months			
Marshmallows		2–3 months		Keep in airtight container.
Cream		2–3 months		Cover tightly. Refrigerate after opening.
Mayonnaise				Refrigerate after opening.
(unopened)		2–3 months		
(opened)	3 months			
Molasses				Refrigerate to extend storage life.
(unopened)		12 months		
(opened)		6 months		
Mustard, prepared yellow				Refrigerate for best storage.
(unopened)		2 years		
(opened)		6–8 months		
Oils				Store in cool place away from heat source to prevent deterioration.
(unopened)		18 months		
(opened)		6–8 months		
Pectin				Look for expiration date.
Liquid		18 months		Recap and refrigerate.
Dry		3 years		
Peanut butter				Refrigeration prolongs storage time and helps prevent rancidity.
(unopened)		6–9 months		
(opened)		2–3 months		
Salad dressing				
Bottled (unopened)		10–12 months		
Bottled (opened)	3 months			
Made from mix	2 weeks			

FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	PANTRY	FREEZER	SPECIAL HANDLING
Shortening		12 months		Store away from heat source to prevent rancidity.
Spices and herbs				Store in airtight containers in dry place away from heat or light. Replace if aroma fades. May be refrigerated or frozen for longer storage.
Whole spices		12 months		
Ground spices		6 months		
Herbs		6 months		
Sugar				For best storage, keep in airtight container.
Brown		4 months		
Confectioner's		18 months		
Granulated		2 years		
Sweetener, artificial		2 years		
Tea				Keep in airtight containers.
Bags		18 months		
Instant		3 years		
Loose		2 years		
Vanilla				Keep tightly closed; volatile oils escape.
(unopened)		2 years		
(opened)		12 months		
Other extracts (opened)		12 months		
Vinegar				Keep tightly closed. Distilled vinegar lasts longer than cider vinegar. Vinegar in glass containers has a longer storage time. If a cloudy mass develops in opened vinegar, do not use.
(unopened)		2 years		
(opened)		12 months		
Vegetables: In general, keep in crisper or moisture-proof wrapping.				
Fresh				
Artichokes	2–3 days			Refrigerate in plastic. Wrap base of stalks with damp cloth or paper towel.
Asparagus	2–3 days		8 months	Refrigerate in plastic. Wrap base of stalks with damp cloth or paper towel.
Beans				
dried		12 months		
green or waxed	1–2 days		8 months	Do not wash green beans until just before use.
lima (unshelled)	3–5 days			
Beets	1–2 weeks			Remove leafy tops. Keep in crisper.
Broccoli	5 days			
Brussels sprouts	5 days			
Cabbage	1 week			
Carrots	5 days		8 months	

FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	PANTRY	FREEZER	SPECIAL HANDLING
Celery	1 week			Celery may keep longer if wrapped with a moist towel.
Corn (in husks)	1–2 days			
Cucumbers	1 week			
Eggplant	2–3 days			
Garlic		5–8 months		
Greens, spinach, leafy greens, etc.	3–4 days			Keep in cool, dry, ventilated area. Rinse and drain greens before refrigerating. Do not allow to freeze.
Lettuce, iceberg	5–7 days			
vacuum packed (unopened)	2–3 weeks			
Mushrooms	1–2 days			Do not wash mushrooms before refrigerating. Do not store in airtight container.
Onions				Store at room temperature in cool, ventilated area.
dry		2–4 weeks		Keep dry.
green	5 days			Keep refrigerated in plastic bag.
Parsley	2–4 weeks			Store with stems in water and covered plastic wrap.
Peas (unshelled)	3–5 days	1 week		
Peppers				
chile	7–10 days		12 months	Keep chile peppers refrigerated in paper bag.
bell	3–4 days		6 months	Freeze for extended use.
Potatoes				Keep fresh potatoes dry and away from sun. For longer storage, keep at 50–60°F. Warmer temperatures encourage sprouting. Don't refrigerate fresh potatoes.
white, fresh		1 week		
sweet, fresh		2–3 weeks		
white, instant (unopened)		6–12 months		
Radishes	1–2 weeks			
Rhubarb	2 weeks			
Rutabagas	2 weeks	1 week		
Squash				
summer varieties	2–4 days			Summer varieties of squash include zucchini and yellow crookneck.
winter varieties		6 months		Winter or hard-shelled squash include pumpkin, acorn, spaghetti, and butternut squash.
Tomatoes, ripe	2–3 days			
Turnips	2 weeks			Do not refrigerate until ripe.
Canned				
All kinds		12 months		

FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	PANTRY	FREEZER	SPECIAL HANDLING
Dried				Keep all dried vegetables cool and dry in airtight container. Refrigerate for up to 12 months. If moisture is present, foods may become unsafe because moisture allows bacterial growth.
Frozen				
Commercially frozen			8 months	
Home frozen			12 months	
Miscellaneous: Snacks, condiments, mixes, prepared foods, etc.				
Baby food, canned				
(unopened)		12 months		
(opened)	2–3 days			Do not serve directly out of the jar.
Cakes, store bought		1–2 days		If cake contains butter, cream, whipped cream, or custard frosting or filling, refrigerate.
Angel food			2 months	
Chiffon sponge			2 months	
Cheese			2–3 months	
Chocolate			4 months	
Fruitcake			12 months	
Yellow pound			6 months	
Frosted			8–12 months	
Home frozen			3 months	
Cake, cookie mixes		12 months		
Canned goods				
(miscellaneous, unopened)		12 months		
Cookies				
(store bought, unopened)		4 months		
(homemade)		2–3 weeks		
Crackers		3 months		
Metered calorie products				
Instant Breakfast, Boost, etc.		6 months		Keep in can, closed jars, or in original packets.
Nuts				
In shell (unopened)		4 months		Freeze for longer life.
Nut meats, packaged (unopened)		6 months	3 months	
Party nuts		2 weeks		
(salted)			6–8 months	
(unsalted)			9–12 months	
Pickles, olives				Refrigerate once opened for 2–3 months.
(canned, unopened)		1–3 months		

FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	PANTRY	FREEZER	SPECIAL HANDLING
Pies and pastries		2–3 days		Those with whipped cream, custard, or chiffon fillings should be refrigerated.
Fruit				
baked			1–2 months	
unbaked			8 months	
Popcorn (unpopped)		2 years		Store in airtight container.
Pudding mixes		12 months		
Sauces, condiments, etc. (store bought)				
Hot sauce, Worcestershire, etc.		2 years		
Salsa				Fresh homemade salsa has a shorter refrigerator storage time depending upon ingredients (4–7 days). Homemade canned products have a shelf life of up to 12 months, unopened, if adequately processed.
(unopened)		12–18 months		
(opened)	1–2 months			
*Blue Diamond Growers. 2019. Frequently asked questions. Retrieved from https://www.bluediamond.com/faqs **Pacific Foods of Oregon. 2019. Ask away. We’re here to help. Retrieved from https://www.pacificfoods.com/faqs/ ***Vita Coco. 2019. Frequently asked questions. Retrieved from https://www.vitacoco.com/faq?products=coconutmilk				



Nancy Flores is the Extension Food Technology Specialist in the Department of Extension Family and Consumer Sciences at NMSU. She earned her B.S. at NMSU, M.S. at the University of Missouri, and Ph.D. at Kansas State. Her Extension activities focus on food safety, food processing, and food technology.



Cindy Schlenker Davies is the County Program Director and Extension Home Economist at NMSU's Bernalillo County Extension Office. She earned her B.S. at Eastern New Mexico University and her M.A. at NMSU. Her Extension and public outreach work focuses on food processing and preservation and food safety.

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