

Bringing the Catch Home

After successful fishing trips or dockside shopping, how can you keep your seafoods fresh until you get home? If handled properly, fish and shellfish can be safely transported for long distances and can retain their freshness for several days.

Handling

You may want to dress fish completely—scale, head and eviscerate, or fillet—so that they are ready to use or freeze when you arrive home. Most seafood markets will dress them for a small fee.

If you do not want to dress fish before traveling, at least head or degill, eviscerate and rinse them well to maintain freshness.

Large fish, such as tuna, should be bled and gutted immediately upon capture. The body cavity should be packed with ice, and the fish smothered in ice. Cut very large fish into pieces that will fit into your cooler.

The most important thing to remember is that seafoods must be kept cold. The colder the temperature, the slower the rate of spoilage.

Superchilling fish

A fast, convenient method for storing fresh fish is superchilling. You will need an insulated cooler, flaked or crushed ice, and rock or table salt.

Coolers vary from thin-walled, foam containers to heavier-walled, plastic ones. The better the insulation, the longer the ice will last and the colder the fish will stay.

Local fish markets are a good source of flaked or crushed ice. Do not use ice that is rough or jagged.

In a separate container, make a salt/ice mixture, using about ½ pound of salt for every 5 pounds of ice. If the cooler does not have a drain, first place a rack in the bottom to keep the seafood out of any water that may accumulate from melting ice.

Line the cooler with 3 to 4 inches of flaked or crushed ice. Layer the fish in the cooler, covering each layer with the salt/ice mixture. Eviscerated fish should be unwrapped and the body cavities filled with ice. Dressed fish and shucked shellfish should be wrapped in heavy, clear plastic; shrimp should be headed, left in the shells, and wrapped in heavy, clear plastic film.

When the cooler is filled, top with a generous layer of ice and close securely. Also close the drain plug.

Place the cooler in a cool, shady section of your car, not in the trunk. Drain off melt water at night and add more ice. On longer trips, you may need to add more salt.

Transporting live shellfish

Live shellfish can be successfully transported, but great care must be taken to ensure food safety.

A cooler is probably the most practical container for holding shellfish during travel.

To carry live crabs, place 3 to 4 inches of ice in the bottom of the cooler. Cover with waxed cardboard or plastic foam in which holes have been punched. This allows the cold to escape, but keep the crabs out of contact with ice or water.

Place the crabs on the cardboard or foam, and cover them with damp burlap. Leave the lid slightly ajar for air circulation.

Maintain a temperature of 40 F to 50 F. The crabs

will be inactive, but will revive when removed from the cold temperature. Limit holding time to one day. Do not use any crabs that die. Live crabs show movement of the legs.

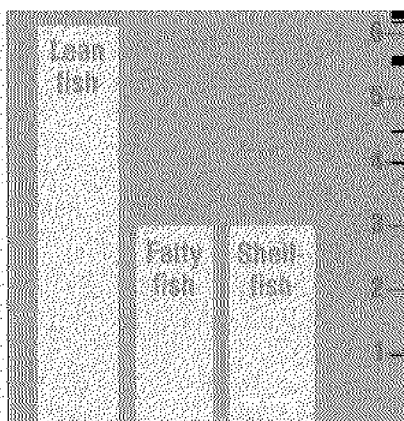
Oysters need to be kept moist, and can be transported in the same way as crabs. While clams need a drier environment and greater air circulation, they too can be successfully carried in this manner, or can be placed on top of ice. Do not place ice on top of clams.

Maintain a temperature of 35 F to 45 F for both oysters and clams. Limit holding time to two to three days. Discard any that are not alive when you reach your destination. The shells of live oysters and clams will be tightly closed or will close tightly when tapped.

Glazing and freezing

At your destination, unpack the fish and rinse them under cold, running water. If you are not planning to cook them right away, pack, glaze and freeze them for future use.

An excellent way to protect fish against oxidation and freezer burn



Frozen storage—in months

is to coat them with a glaze of lemon juice and gelatin.

Measure $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of bottled lemon juice into a pint container, and fill the rest of the container with water. Dissolve 1 packet of unflavored gelatin in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the mixture.

Heat the remaining liquid to boiling; then stir the dissolved gelatin mixture into the boiling liquid. Cool to room temperature.

Dip the fillet or fish in the liquid; allow it to drain for several seconds when you lift it out.

Wrap the fish tightly in a heavy, protective plastic film. Using a high-quality wrap is very important. Label and date the finished package. Freeze as quickly as possible.

Shrimp should be headed and frozen in their shells in freezer containers. After filling the carton, cover the shrimp with water, leaving enough head space for the ice to expand.

Scallops should be shucked and frozen in air-tight containers.

Clams and oysters are best frozen in their shells, which

makes them easy to shuck with no loss of juices, but they can be shucked and frozen in air-tight containers.

Blue crabs should be cleaned and cooked before freezing. Freeze the cores and claws, and thaw before picking the meat out. The quality of the crab meat will be superior to that of frozen, picked meat that undergoes noticeable textural changes.

Ideally, all frozen seafoods should be used within two to three months for maximum quality. When properly frozen, lean fish such as flounder, snapper and trout should maintain quality up to six months. Fatty fish such as bluefish, mackerel and mullet should be used within three months. Shrimp, scallops, clams, oysters and crabs can be stored up to three months. The sooner fish and shellfish are frozen after harvest, the longer the shelf life will be.

Never thaw seafood at room temperature. Place the package in cold, running water, or leave it in your refrigerator overnight.

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This brochure was prepared by Joyce Taylor, UNC Sea Grant's seafood education specialist. For more information, contact her at the North Carolina State University Seafood Laboratory, P.O. Box 1137, Morehead City, NC 28557.

For a copy of this brochure, write UNC Sea Grant College Program, Box 8605, NCSU, Raleigh, NC 27695-8605. Ask for publication number UNC-SG-86-26.