

USDA Gives Tips on Sending Food Gifts to U.S. Military

WASHINGTON, March 17, 2003--As more U.S. military service personnel are deployed to the Persian Gulf area, their family and friends may be planning to send parcels of food for their enjoyment. The U.S. Department of Agriculture today is providing guidance for mailing food gifts to those serving in the Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

The most important thing to remember when mailing food gifts is to choose foods that are not perishable, can tolerate a range of temperatures and won't break with rough handling. Also, because of security risks, the U.S. Postal Service will no longer deliver mail addressed to "Any Serviceman," so be sure there is a name and address on the package.

WHAT TO CONSIDER

Perishable foods, such as meat, poultry, fish and soft cheeses, must be kept at 40 °F or below to remain safe," said Susan Conley, director of Food Safety Education for USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service. "These foods cannot be safely left at room temperature for more than 2 hours, so tolerating a week or more in the mail is unsafe. 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."

For service members stationed in Persian Gulf countries, pork and pork products should be excluded, as should alcohol, since they are forbidden for religious reasons. The USDA also advises against sending high-moisture baked goods, such as pumpkin bread, because they are susceptible to molds. Fragile foods such as delicate cookies probably won't make the trip intact and products containing chocolate, like chocolate chip cookies, could melt in high temperatures.

RECOMMENDED FOOD GIFTS

Food safety specialists at USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline are offering the following advice for sending food gifts to U.S. armed service members that are overseas.

- Dried beef or poultry such as beef jerky, turkey jerky or beef slims are safe to mail. Bacteria can't grow in foods preserved by removing moisture.
- Dehydrated soups and drink mixes are lightweight and safe to mail. Condiments such as hot sauce and Cajun seasonings in packets or unbreakable jars are useful for spice lovers.
- Canned specialties such as corned beef, anchovies, shrimp, dips and cracker spreads make nice treats. Recipients should be cautioned not to use any cans that are damaged or swollen. Foods in glass containers should not be mailed because they can break.
- Dense and dry baked goods such as fruit cakes and biscotti are good choices for mailing because they will not mold. Other suitable baked goods include commercially packaged cakes and cookies in airtight tins, dry cookies such as ginger snaps and specialty crackers.

- When mailing sturdy cookies and homemade candies, wrap each piece individually and pack items in commercially popped corn, Styrofoam packing peanuts or foam to help cushion the trip. Place the 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 sturdy homemade sweets such as pralines and toffee are safe to mail because their high sugar content prevents bacterial growth.

As an alternative to homemade gifts, some families may wish to send a military member's favorite mail order foods. Shelf stable beef "summer sausage," cheeses, cakes and snacks can be ordered on the Internet or through mail order catalogues. 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 for safety.

Source: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/news/2003/military03.htm>