

Foods You Should Keep In Your Vehicle At All Times

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Some of us have a good amount of food in storage in a pantry. Others have food storage that extends to their basement and even root cellars. A standard practice for preparedness is the proactive [stockpiling of foods for an emergency](#). But how many of us have any amount of food stored in our vehicles.

Road Trip Realities

Americans spend a lot of time in their cars and often travel great distances in their vehicles. Here are some averages to ponder:

- Each day, [Americans drive about](#) 40 miles and spend an average of one hour behind the wheel.
- Vacation trips for Americans [average from](#) 400 to 600 miles round trip.
- An [average bug out results](#) in people driving at least 200 miles a day (usually at lower speeds).
- The [average duration for a bug out](#) or evacuation is 72 hours but that often can go as long as 14 days.

What the facts and statistics indicate is that we not only spend a lot of time in our vehicles, but we may find ourselves far from home with our vehicle as our only shelter on the road. Many of us have basic car kits in the trunk with things like jumper cables, first aid kits, flashlights and tire repair kits. Some of us even have some water bottles in the trunk. But how many of us think about packing any kind of food?

Our usual food on the road is defined by a cup of coffee or soft drink in the drink holder and a cheeseburger in hand. But in a time of disaster or outright collapse you'll be lucky to find a drive-thru open and even the grocery stores may be closed.

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This is Not Hard

Stocking some food in a small, [plastic box with a lid](#) in the trunk will take only a couple of minutes. You can probably find some of the food in your kitchen pantry or just remember to buy the foods you need on your next trip to the grocery store.

The big question becomes –which foods are best to toss in the trunk for meals on the road? The answers may surprise you.

The Fundamental Challenge: Temperature Extremes

We've all had the experience of climbing into a vehicle parked in the sun in summer. We can't wait to get the car or truck started and get those windows open and the air-conditioner on. Darker colored vehicles (especially black) are notorious for high temperatures sometimes [reaching up to 140 degrees](#) Fahrenheit and more.

And then there's winter. The internal temperature in any vehicle will reflect the outside temperature and many days are well below [the ideal freezing temperature](#) of 0 degrees you might have set for your freezer in your kitchen.

Complicating everything is the action of a freezing/thawing cycle that not only tears apart many foods, but creates moisture in some dried foods creating pockets for bacterial growth.

This isn't just about throwing some food in the trunk and forgetting about it. It's about selecting the right foods and packaging and remembering to occasionally rotate the food you have in that trunk.

And by the way, water will always top any list. We can actually go beyond a week without food but [only about 3 days without water](#). Besides, water is often a key ingredient for cooking anything but that gets to another consideration.

Cooking Challenges on the Road

When we pack to go camping we always have a cook kit with our gear. When many of us have to bug out we have bug out bags packed up and ready to go with at least basic cooking gear. But if we find ourselves on the road during a sudden and unexpected natural or manmade disaster –how many of us have anything for cooking in the car?

That could affect the choices you make when it comes to assembling food that you plan to have in your vehicle at all times. You could always pack a little cook kit like the Boy Scouts carry, and some people keep their bug out bags in their vehicle at all times –but most of us don't.

If you don't have the equipment, time nor inclination to cook on the road you need to think about foods that don't require a cooking step. And while it's true that many foods can be eaten without cooking, you really should try those uncooked foods first to see if there might be an alternative.

Then again, there are some articles out there about how you can use your car to cook. Some involve placing food on the engine block, others use devices that attach to your exhaust system, and there's even a way to cook on top of your dashboard where measured temperatures [can get up to 157 degrees F.](#)

Using your car as an improvised oven takes some time and planning but it's worth [knowing how to do it](#) –just in case.

One Other Thought...

Given the constant challenge of temperature extremes and its affect on foods, there's a way to work around the problem. It involves packing and then repacking 3 different types of food kits depending on the seasons and long road-trips.

We'll cover both recommended foods and packages and those that we wouldn't recommend. Amounts will vary depending on the number of people typically traveling in your vehicle but collectively you should have at least enough for an emergency. Here's the thought:

1. A Winter Kit

Your winter food kit are the foods that you would keep in your trunk for the 6-months or so that define freezing or below freezing temperatures in your area. These are foods and packages that can endure not only very cold temperatures but the inevitable cycle of freezing and thawing. They include:

- Water. At least a gallon
- [Jerky](#). Any variety.
- [Trail mix](#). Avoid those with chocolate added (it will eventually melt).
- [Energy bars](#) (Again, avoid chocolate as an ingredient)
- [Survival ration bars](#) (high calorie and survive anywhere).
- [MRE's](#) (One for each person makes sense in addition to these other foods).
- Electrolyte powder ([Gator-Ade makes a powdered additive](#) that will help keep you hydrated).
- [Hard Candy](#) (a treat for kids and a candy that can survive in most temperatures).
- [Freeze-fried fruits](#) and [vegetables](#) (keep an eye on them because freezing and thawing can create moisture pockets

but most do well in all seasons).

- Assorted nuts (buy them by [the snack bag size](#). Cashews, walnuts and almonds are best).
- [Crackers](#). (You may want to repackage them in a Mylar bag with an oxygen absorber to keep them dry and crisp.)
- [Tuna in Mylar packets](#) (you don't want canned in winter).
- [Peanut butter](#) (good in winter but the oils can go quickly rancid in summer. A great protein source.)
- [Pop-Tarts](#) (surprisingly durable in cold temperatures and another favorite with kids)
- Dry breakfast cereals (buy the [cereals in the small, plastic containers](#) that are usually single-serve)
- [Pretzels](#) (the salt will actually help you stay hydrated and will tolerate the cold better than some other snack foods)
- [Honey](#) (if you want a sweetener it's best to go with honey which was found to survive 3,000 years in an ancient Egyptian tomb).
- [Spam](#) (it's in a can but the low relative moisture content will keep it from bursting the seams)
- [Canned sardines](#) or [mackerel](#) in oil.

This selection falls far from the category of cuisine but that's the nature of most survival foods. One type of package we avoided for winter is canned foods. Most canned foods are packed in water or some other liquid. Water (and liquids) expand when they freeze. The can will bulge. Some can actually explode or leak. That's not good.

Here are some other foods and packages to avoid in winter:

- Chocolate or any product containing chocolate as an ingredient unless you don't mind the mess. The chocolate will still be food-safe and handles freezing fine, but it just doesn't handle freezing and thawing well and that will inevitably happen.

- Any foods with a high moisture content that will be subject to freezing and thawing. The food will tear itself apart. This is another problem with canned foods but even if it's not canned, think about the moisture content.
- Many canned foods especially those packed in water

2. The Summer Kit

Summer is the biggest challenge to food in a vehicle. Most foods are designed for storage [between temperatures of 50 to 70 degrees F.](#) and that's in a kitchen pantry. It's rare that even an air conditioned car will get to 70 degrees let alone lower.

What's worse is those high temperatures that spike when vehicles are sitting in the sun (and eventually they will all sit in the summer sun). It seems safe to assume that some foods like MRE's would tolerate the heat, but even MRE's will succumb to the heat. In fact, MRE's will [only last a month at 120 degrees F.](#) Considering that vehicle interiors can get up to 140 degrees, MRE's are off the summer list.

You'll also want to avoid any foods with any fat content. As dry as they may be, that takes jerky sticks or strips off the list. Fats turn rancid in high heat and while they might still be safe to eat you definitely won't like the taste.

The good news is that there are foods that are very heat tolerant assuming they are packaged properly. If in doubt you can ensure the best packaging by re-packing foods in those Mylar bags with oxygen absorbers we previously mentioned. If you can vacuum seal the Mylar bags as well, all the better. Here are some foods for your summer kit:

- A gallon of water
- Freeze dried fruits and vegetables (don't carryover any

freeze dried fruits or vegetables from your winter kit. Start over with new stuff)

- Energy bars (but avoid any with added oils like canola, coconut or palm oil or you'll run into rancidity problems)
- Survival Energy Bars (Always safe in any temperature when you [buy the real thing](#))
- [Canned fruits](#) and vegetables (pack only vegetables canned in water. Avoid any foods canned in any type of oil)
- Crackers (remember to buy new ones for summer)
- Cereal in those little plastic containers (eat the winter ones and rotate some new ones in for summer)
- Pretzels (salted are best and repacked in Mylar bags is ideal)
- Honey (pack it and forget it. It's indestructible)
- [Canned tuna in water](#), not oil

The fundamental difference between the foods recommended for summer versus those recommend for winter is literally “oil and water.”

Water freezes in winter but tolerates high temperatures to some degree in summer. Oil tolerates cold temperatures but quickly turns rancid in the high heat of summer. That means that some of the foods we avoid in winter make the good list in summer, and our good winter list starts to become foods to avoid in summer.

Here are some other foods and packages to avoid in summer:

- Nuts (nuts are high in unsaturated fats and [particularly prone to spoilage](#) and rancidity in high heat)
- Any food packaged or canned in oil

- Foods that contain oil or fats (meats and oily fish like sardines and mackerel) even if packed in water
- Peanut butter
- All jerky (mostly due to residual fat content unless extremely lean and salted)

3. The Road Trip Kit

The kits we've defined so far are basically short-term, set-it-and-forget-it approaches. You pack up a kit for winter and another for summer and you're good to go. But as you may have noticed they're pretty basic and fall clearly in the category of survival food.

If you are planning a road trip of any significant length (200 miles or more), and especially if it's overnight –you might want to think about supplementing your basic kits. The idea is to be prepared for an unknown disaster while you're away from home and on the road. The assumption is you already have a winter or summer kit of food packed depending on the time of year, but this is a good way to add to your larder.

This is isn't about a family camping trip. You'd have plenty packed for that kind of event. This is about a business trip, a trip to visit friends or family, or any other type of trip that will have you on the road for any length of time.

Because you don't have to be overly concerned about long-term exposure to high heat, low temperatures or both you'll have more options. These are the things that might make things a little more normal but most should be eaten first in an emergency. Here are some possibilities:

- Meals in a can like [beef stew](#), chili, or any other pre-made meals.
- [Peanut butter and jelly](#)
- A loaf of bread

- [Candy bars](#) (including chocolate)
- Anything else you like to eat that doesn't require refrigeration or freezing and can tolerate short-term temperature extremes.

If all else fails you can snack on them while on the road.

Food Prep on the Road

In a perfect world you don't have to do any cooking with your food kits. We've actually avoided some safe foods like oatmeal and macaroni and cheese because they require cooking. If you have a small cook kit packed you can certainly cook some meals. In fact, cooked food may be especially welcome in winter.

For those of you who are a bit adventurous you can also use your vehicle to cook food. Here are some links to articles that cover the basics of "car cookery."

- [Can you cook a meal on your car's engine?](#)
- [How to Cook Food Using Your Car](#)
- [How I Cook What I Eat Living in My Pickup](#)

Assessing food quality

In spite of our best efforts there are always surprises when it comes to any kind of food storage. If you're suddenly in a situation where you have to turn to your [emergency food](#) kit, do some simple tests before eating anything. Here's what you're looking for:

- **Change in color**
- **Change in texture**
- **Change in taste**

- **Change in smell**

If you notice any of these characteristics the standard mantra is “if in doubt, throw it out.” You have other foods to choose from and any food-borne disease isn’t worth the risk. Especially in difficult times.

One Last Thing

- **Don’t forget to pack some basic utensils.** Think in terms of knife, fork, spoon and maybe a large cup. On a basic level those should give you a fighting chance to at least eat in a civilized manner. Better yet, just pack [a family cook kit](#). If you don’t have room just make sure you pack foods that don’t require cooking.
- **Maybe the most critical thing is** to remember to rotate your foods when transitioning from winter to summer and to generally keep an eye on foods you have stored in your trunk or the back of your SUV or truck. If anything doesn’t seem right, replace it.
- **Finally, find a good way** to contain all of your packed foods. The last thing you want them is rolling around in the trunk or the back of your SUV. Small, plastic storage totes are a good bet or even a plastic shoebox with a lid. A lot has to do with the bulk of your collected foods. This will let you keep it out of the way for other things you toss in the trunk or back.

And Oh Yeah...

Unlike other food storage scenarios where you can often ignore expiration dates, the rules are different for foods stored under temperature extremes. When it’s time to turnover your previous season’s food stockpile –toss them out unless absolutely you’re sure of its integrity. Then again, you never

have to worry about that honey.

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