



# How to Pack a Cooler So It Stays Cold

By Mary Margaret Chappell  
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Whether you're packing for a [picnic](#) in the park, a cross-country road trip, or a multiday [camping](#) adventure, knowing how to properly pack a cooler can make all the difference. The following tips ensure optimal chill for day trips, long car rides, and even weekends in the wild.

With a bit of prep and the right layering method, you can keep your perishables in top shape, no matter how far you're traveling. Whether you're working with a soft-sided cooler bag or a heavy-duty ice chest, the packing tips below will help you get the most out of your cooler.

## Prep and Pre-Chill

Place all foods in zip-top bags or square airtight containers that fit snugly in your cooler. This includes store-bought items with odd shapes and cardboard packaging that would otherwise monopolize cooler space and get crushed or soggy in transit. Refrigerate everything overnight.

## Build a Base Layer of Ice

Line the bottom of the cooler with ice—cubes, blocks, packs, or frozen water bottles (which can do double duty as beverages). The larger the better; big frozen items melt more slowly than cubes or small packs.

## Remember the 2:1 Ratio

Cooler manufacturers recommend packing coolers with

a 2 parts ice to 1 part food ratio for optimal chill.

## Keep It Tight

Time to play cooler Tetris! Starting with items you'll need last, pack them tightly in the cooler so there are as few air pockets as possible. Fill any gaps with ice or small ice packs. (One exception is whole fruits and veggies, which shouldn't be packed directly next to ice packs—[see tips below](#).) Finish with foods you'll want to access first, e.g., a snack or picnic lunch.

## Seal in the Cold

Cover everything with a final layer of ice or ice packs, filling the cooler to the top. Reusable flat ice sheets work especially well here: They're light and easy to shift and replace each time you open the cooler. Keep the cooler closed as much as possible so the interior stays cold. If you don't have a shady spot for the cooler, cover it with a blanket for extra insulation.

## Handle Produce with Care

Headed to a resort or a campsite where grocery options are limited? Then you're probably bringing along a bag's worth of whole fruits and veggies. Here's how to pack them in a separate cooler so they stay intact and optimally fresh.

1. Protect items from extreme cold by topping the cooler's base layer of ice with cardboard or a paper bag.
2. Don't fill gaps between unpackaged produce with ice. Intense cold and moisture can cause fruits and veggies to soften and wilt.
3. Delicate items go in last! Add lettuce, berries, grapes, and other crushable items right before you close the lid.