

TEMPORARY STORAGE OF FRESH FISH

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Most people will agree that fresh caught or harvested fish have the highest quality and best flavor. The way to ensure freshness is to fillet and cook your fish as soon as they come out of the water. That may not always be practical, particularly when dealing with more than a few pounds of fish. However, there are several simple and cost effective steps that will preserve that fresh caught quality and allow temporary transport or storage.

First, it is important to process (dress) your live fish as soon as possible -- immediately is best. At the least, the head or gills and the internal organs (viscera) must be removed. After short periods of time, the gills and viscera begin to digest themselves as well as the surrounding meat, damaging quality and texture. The gills and viscera are also a source of bacteria that can invade the meat and lower product quality by producing compounds, which create that undesirable "fishy" taste and other "off-flavors".

The second and simplest step is to adequately ice your fish -- dressed carcasses or fillets -- in a well insulated container. Two pounds of ice should be added for every pound of fish. Fish and ice should be mixed as evenly as possible. By keeping your catch well iced, fresh fish (or freshly harvested shrimp with heads removed) can be stored in

good condition for 10-12 days. However, if fish are to be held for more than a few hours, water from melted ice must be allowed to drain from the holding container. It is important to mention that fresh, iced crab; crawfish; or freshwater shrimp can not be held on ice for more than 48-72 hours because the muscle begins to digest itself and becomes soft.

Except for the coldwater species (e.g. those from the North Atlantic), fish are commonly harvested from cool and warm waters. The bacteria associated with warmwater fish (catfish, bluegill, bass, fish or shellfish from the Gulf of Mexico, etc.) are adapted to temperatures in the 65-90° F range and do not grow well in the cold (32° F) produced by ice. Not only does ice limit bacterial growth, it washes bacteria off the fish as it melts. This is why it is important to keep storage containers well drained. After 10-12 days, cold tolerant bacteria begin to grow. The fish must be frozen or eaten by then or they will spoil.

The secret to bringing home fish with that fresh caught or farm fresh flavor is immediate processing and plenty of ice. A little extra effort and a few dollars worth of ice will keep them coming back for more.