

Drying Food in the Microwave Oven

Drying, or dehydration, is a method of preserving food by removing the moisture from it. Commercially, this is done mechanically in a heated air dryer. You can dry food in your home with a conventional oven, a dehydrator or sunlight. Most home dehydrators have controlled heating systems that use light bulbs and a heater or solar power.

The ideal temperatures for drying food are between 115° to 165° degrees Fahrenheit. It's hard to control microwave heat by temperature. The keys to success are quantity, timing and power level.

Small amounts of certain low-moisture foods can be dried in a microwave oven. These include: herbs, citrus peel and mushrooms .

You'll need cardboard cut to fit inside the oven or a paperboard tray and towels. Don't use recycled paper towels in a microwave oven. These may contain small bits of metal from the recycling process and can create sparks or cause the paper to ignite.

To dry herbs:

Wash and dry fresh herbs. Remove the stems and place the leaves in a measuring cup to measure them. Cut a piece of cardboard to fit inside the oven or use a paperboard tray. Cover the paper with two layers of paper towels. Sprinkle herbs evenly in a circle onto the towel. Leave the center empty. Set the microwave oven cook level to "high" and heat the herbs until they're dry and brittle.

For one cup of herbs, heat for about three to four minutes. For two cups, heat for five and-a-half to six minutes. For three cups, heat seven-and-a-half to eight minutes, and for five cups, heat ten to eleven minutes.

The weather in Georgia makes it hard to dry foods in a microwave oven. The humidity is usually too high to dry most foods successfully. When drying foods, you must control the humidity. If humidity is high, the food will reabsorb moisture as quickly as it is removed.

Cool the herbs...

Crush them to the desired fineness and store them in an air-tight container. The final, crushed product will be about one fourth as much as the fresh product. You should use about one teaspoon of dried herbs for each tablespoon of fresh herbs.

To dry citrus peel.

As an example, lemon peel, wash and dry six lemons. Grate the yellow outer layer to measure 3/4 of a cup. Cut a piece of cardboard to fit inside of the oven or use a paperboard tray. Cover the tray with two layers of paper towels. Sprinkle the grated peel in a circle evenly onto the towels. Leave the center empty. The microwave power should be set on two-thirds for 12 - 13 minutes or until the peel is dry. Re-arrange the peel once. Cool the peel and store it in an air-tight container. The yield of dried peel should be about one-third as much as the fresh peel.

To dry mushrooms...

Wash and dry fresh, firm mushrooms. Remove the stems and slice the mushrooms thinly, measure one cup. Cut a piece of cardboard to fit inside the oven or use a paperboard tray. Cover the paper with two layers of paper toweling. Arrange mushrooms in a circle in a single layer. Again, leave the center empty. Set the microwave power on high for 3 1/2 - 4 minutes. Rotate the mushrooms. Heat them on one-third power for 4 1/2 to five minutes. Cool the mushrooms and store them in an air-tight container.

For more information on drying food in the microwave; contact your local county Extension office.