Mailing Food Gifts to Military

The most important thing to remember when mailing food gifts to U.S. service members overseas is to choose foods that

- are not perishable,
- can tolerate a range of temperatures, and
- will not break with rough handling.

Recommended Food Gifts

The following is a list of suggested food items to send as gifts to military service members. Check with your local post office to see if there are restrictions on food items based on the specific zip code to which you are mailing.

- **Hard candies and firm homemade sweets** such as pralines and toffee are safe to mail because their high sugar content prevents bacterial growth.
- **Dried fruits**, such as raisins and apricots, and commercially-packaged trail mix and nuts, need no refrigeration.
- **Dried beef or poultry**, such as beef jerky, turkey jerky or beef slims, are safe to mail. Bacteria cannot multiply in food preserved by removing moisture.
- **Dehydrated soups and fruit drink mixes** are lightweight and safe to mail.
- **Regional condiments**, such as hot sauce and Cajun seasonings in packets, are useful for spicing up Meals Ready to Eat (MREs).
- **Dense and dry baked goods**, such as fruit cakes and biscotti, are good choices for mailing because they will not become moldy.
- **Commercially-packaged cookies** in airtight tins, dry cookies such as ginger snaps and specialty crackers are good choices.

As an alternative to homemade gifts, some families may wish to send a military member’s favorite mail-order food. 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, never order any food that requires refrigeration.

Food Gifts Not Recommended

- Do not send canned foods because the temperatures reached during mailing are very high and can affect safety and quality.
- Do not send high-moisture baked goods, such as pumpkin bread, because they mold easily.
- Fragile foods, such as delicate cookies, probably won’t make the trip intact.
- Chocolate in cookies is likely to melt at the high temperatures.

Frequently Asked Questions

**What restrictions are there for sending food to service members in the Persian Gulf?** Never send alcoholic beverages to service members stationed in Persian Gulf countries. It is also best to exclude pork and pork products, since they are forbidden for religious reasons in Islamic countries.

**I would like to mail a homemade “cake-in-a-jar” to someone in the military. Is this a good idea?** No, homemade breads or cakes in a jar are not safe and should not be mailed to service members. Many recipes for quick breads and cakes are low-acid and have the potential for supporting the growth of bacteria, like *Clostridium botulinum*, if present inside the closed jar. These products are also not recommended for canning. In fact, most of these products are not really “canned”. The directions call for baking in the jar and then closing with a canning lid without processing in any way. When these
products are made commercially, additives, preservatives and processing controls not available for home recipes are used. Manufacturers of canning jars also do not endorse baking in their jars, and glass jars are not recommended for mailing.

What are the deadlines for mailing packages for the holidays? The deadline for the most economical postage to overseas military, including in Iraq and Afghanistan, is Nov. 12. For more information from the U.S. Postal Service on dates for mailing holiday packages and cards see Shipping Out the Holidays to Military Heroes http://www.usps.com/communications/newsroom/2010/pr10_092.pdf#search='deadline for mailing packages to military'.

How should packages to the military be addressed? Use the service member’s full name. For security reasons, mail will not be delivered to “Any Serviceman”. Also required is the unit designation and APO/FPO information with the nine-digit Zip code and a return street name and address. Do not include the country or the base camp’s city, as the package might be routed through the host country’s mail system. Place the recipient’s address on one side only of the package, and on the lower right portion.

Tips for Packaging Foods
To mail a package overseas, you will have to fill out a customs form listing every item and its value, so be sure you have that information before sealing the package. To request free, special military packaging kits from the U.S. post office, call 1-800-610-8734.

When mailing firm, dry cookies and homemade candies, wrap each piece individually and pack items in commercially-popped, or air-popped, unbuttered popcorn, or foam packing “peanuts”.

The U.S. Postal Service provides these tips:
• The Box—Select a box strong enough to protect the contents and large enough to accommodate cushioning. If reusing a box, cover all previous labels and markings with a heavy black marker or adhesive labels.
• Cushioning—Cushioning the contents with newspaper is a creative way to send news from home. Styrofoam and bubble wrap are also good choices. Close and shake the box. If it rattles, add additional cushioning to keep items from shifting.
• Sealing—Tape the opening of the box and reinforce all seams with 2” wide tape. Use clear or brown packaging tape, reinforced packing tape or paper tape. Do not use cord, string or twine, as it causes the package to get caught and possibly damaged in sorting equipment.
• Identify—Include a card describing the contents. Occasionally improperly wrapped packages fall apart during shipment. Including a card inside the package that lists the sender’s and recipient’s addresses along with a description of the contents helps in collecting items that have fallen open during processing.

For more information on mailing foods, see HGIC 3605, Mailing Perishable Foods.

Sources:

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