

Creating Health & Nutrition

Reducing Food Waste with Food Safety in Mind

Tip

To keep food fresh and from spoiling too soon, keep a thermometer in your refrigerator and freezer. The temperature of your refrigerator should be no higher than 40°F, and your freezer should be no higher than 0°F.

Does it seem like you are constantly finding food that is out of date or has gone bad in the back of your refrigerator or pantry? Throwing away food is a waste of food and money; however, eating those foods could make you and your family sick! Below are some tips to help you reduce the amount of food you throw out while consuming foods that are safe to eat.

Plan Shopping Trips

- Before shopping, plan meals for the next seven days.
- Inventory food items so you know the foods you already have on hand.
- Make a shopping list with exactly what you need based on your inventory and meal plans.
- Do not buy more food than you need before you will return to the store.
- Consider buying some shelf-stable foods like low-sodium canned peas or frozen peas instead of fresh peas.

Food Preparation

When cooking, always use a food thermometer to be sure the food has reached the correct temperature before serving. Do not cook more food than you need for a meal unless you have a plan for using the leftovers. Transfer leftovers

to small containers and refrigerate them quickly; do not cool leftovers on the counter.

For best quality, use cooked leftovers within four days. You can freeze leftovers before the four-day expiration if you cannot eat them in time. Always label and date leftover food items with a preparation date or discard date.

If you find that fresh produce goes to waste, wash and cut it, place it in containers, and then store it in the refrigerator immediately after purchase. Foods like broccoli, peppers, onions, and pineapples are good examples of foods that can be cut ahead of use to save time later. On the other hand, wait to slice apples and avocados since they can brown and become slimy. To prevent mold, wait to wash produce like grapes and berries until you are ready to eat them.

Get Creative with Leftovers

If you have unplanned leftovers, share the food with friends or neighbors. Make one day each week "leftover day" to use up your leftover meals and produce. If you have a small amount of leftover produce, incorporate it into a soup or casserole. Having a plan or use for leftovers is a great idea. For example, if you made baked chicken for lunch Monday, you could use the leftover chicken on Wednesday in a stir-fry or quesadilla.

Store Food Properly

- Know the guidelines for storing fresh fruits and vegetables to prolong quality. The Food Keeper app from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides storage guidelines for all foods.
- Store bread in the freezer if you will not consume it quickly.



- Store meat and dairy products in the back of the refrigerator where it is colder. To allow for proper airflow, do not pack your refrigerator or freezer with too much food.
- Adopt the first in, first out approach by placing foods that expire first at the front of the refrigerator or pantry.
- Store fruits and vegetables separate from meat and poultry to prevent cross-contamination.
- Do not store food on the floor to prevent pests from getting into food.

Food Product Dates and Food Safety

Unopened shelf-stable foods that are about to expire can be donated to a soup kitchen for quick use. Stale bread can be used to make croutons instead of being thrown away. Do not use canned foods that have dents, bulges, rust, or broken safety seals. Do not eat foods that have developed a bad smell, flavor, or change in texture. The different food product dates (best by, sell by, use by) can be confusing. USDA is urging manufacturers to adopt the phrase “best if used by” to indicate quality, not food safety.

Common Dates	
Best if used by or before	Indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality; is not a purchase or safety date
Sell by	Tells the store how long to display the product for sale for inventory management; is not a safety date
Use by date	The last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality; is not a safety date except for when used on infant formula

- Meat should be used or frozen by the “use by” date.
- Milk is generally fresh for five to seven days after the “sell by” date.
- Yogurt is fresh for seven to ten days after the “sell by” date.
- Eggs can be used for three to five weeks after the “sell by” date.

Overall, these dates are guidelines. If the food has been properly handled and stored, consuming it a few days after the date should be fine. If a food appears to have a change in texture, color, or smell or has not been cooked, stored, or held at the proper temperature, then it is best to discard the food. When in doubt, throw it out!

Sources

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