



How Long Can You Safely Store Food?

To properly store food, you need to know not only how to store foods but how long food will be safe and remain high quality. When fresh meat or produce is acquired greatly affects how long it can be stored without spoilage or loss of quality. Stored foods are never fresher than when they're first put into storage.

Foods can be categorized into three groups: perishable, semi-perishable, and non-perishable. Perishable foods include meat, poultry, fish, milk, eggs, and raw fruits and vegetables. All cooked foods are also considered perishable foods.

Semi-perishable foods may remain unspoiled for six months to about one year if properly stored. These foods include flour, grain products, dried fruits, and dry mixes.

Non-perishable foods do not spoil unless carelessly handled. Sugar, dried beans, spices, and canned goods are non-perishable foods.

Quality and nutritive value of food deteriorates during storage; therefore, foods should not be held long beyond their established shelf life. When food is stored too long, there is the risk of two things happening: 1) color, flavor, aroma, texture or appearance deteriorates to a level where people will not consume the food, and 2) nutrient deterioration.

Cupboard/Pantry Storage

Pantry storage conditions should ideally be clean, dry, cool, and dark. The temperature in the pantry should be 50 to 70 °F. Higher temperatures speed deterioration. Although many staples and pantry items have a long shelf life, buy only what you expect to use within the recommended storage times. To prevent foods from deteriorating in the pantry, store them in metal, glass, or plastic containers.

To prevent spoilage, use the "First In, First Out" system, rotating food so older canned and dried food items are used before newly purchased items. Store new supplies of food at the back of the shelf and move earlier purchased food forward to be used first. To help with this system, write the date of purchase on the item or circle the "use by" date on the package.

Routinely check canned items for signs of spoilage. Do not use food from bulging, leaking, or dented cans. If liquid spurts from a can when opened, immediately discard the food.

Refrigerator

Maintain the refrigerator temperature at 34 to 40° F. Use an appliance thermometer in the refrigerator to monitor temperature. Always store the most perishable items, including meats, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products, in the coldest sections of the refrigerator. Use the refrigerator thermometer to check the temperature of the crispers and shelves to find the coldest areas. Do not overload the refrigerator as this can reduce the inside temperature. There should be enough space between foods so air can freely circulate around them. Clean the refrigerator to remove spills and spoiled foods, which provide a medium for bacteria to grow in and possibly contaminate other foods. Refrigerator temperatures only slow bacterial growth; they do not prevent it.

Store refrigerated foods in airtight wraps or containers to maintain quality. This prevents foods from drying out and odors or flavors from transferring from one food to another. Store raw meats, poultry, and fish so juices do not drip on and contaminate other foods. It's also a good idea to set them in another container to help prevent dripping. Use food promptly for best quality.

Freezer

Maintain a freezer temperature of 0°F or below. Food quality deteriorates at temperatures above 0°F. Monitor the temperature with an appliance thermometer. Freezer temperatures stop or prevent bacteria from growing but do not kill them. Package items for the freezer in moisture- and vapor-proof wraps or containers. Use only freezer-grade foil, plastic wrap or bags, freezer paper, or freezer containers. Label all freezer foods with the date, type of food, and number of servings. Time is important for maintaining high-quality food. Frozen foods do not last forever. Keep an inventory of freezer contents and maintain the “First In, First Out” rotation system.

Food Freshness: Check the Label

Consumers can judge freshness of food when the manufacturer uses “open dating” on food packages. There are four types of dates that may be found on a food package:

- **“Sell-by” or “Pull date.”** This date states how long the store can display the product for sale. Purchase the product before this date expires.
- **“Best if used by (or before) date.”** This date means the food will be of its highest quality or flavor if consumed before the date on the package. It is *not* a purchase-by or safety date.

- **“Use-By” or “Expiration date.”** This is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. The date has been determined by the manufacturer of the product. The expiration date is the last date a store can sell the eggs, for example, and still refer to them as “fresh.” Buy eggs before the expiration date and use them within 30 days. After 30 days, discard. Do not buy eggs if this expiration date has passed.
- **“Pack date,” “Closed” or coded dates.”** This is the date the food was packaged or processed.

Erring on the side of caution is always wise. Rotate foods with the “First In, First Out” system. Use the oldest first. Be aware of the food storage guidelines. Throw away anything that is infested, discolored, smells bad, bulges, leaks, is rusty, moldy, or just does not seem right to you. **“When in doubt, throw it out!”**

The Wyoming Food Safety Coalition (WFSC) is dedicated to preventing food borne illness. This collaborative program is sponsored by the University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service, Wyoming Beef Council, Department of Agriculture (WDA), Department of Health, Environmental Health Association, and Lodging and Restaurant Association. For information about food safety or the WFSC, please contact your local county Extension office; WDA Consumer Health Specialist; or City-County Health Department.

Sources: Vicki Hayman, University Extension Educator, Nutrition and Foods Safety, University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension;
National Restaurant Association; USDA - Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)

