

## How to Cut Food Waste and Maintain Food Safety



*Practice habits that are good for your health, your wallet, and the environment!*

Food safety is a major concern. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that there are about 48 million cases of foodborne illness annually – the equivalent of sickening 1 in 6 Americans each year. And each year these illnesses result in an estimated 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths.

Food waste is also a major concern. Wasted food is a huge challenge to our natural resources, our environment, and our pocketbooks:

**Our resources?** Each year getting food to U.S. tables requires:

- 80 percent of our freshwater,
- 10 percent of our available energy, and,
- Half of our land.

**The environment?** Organic waste, mostly food, is the second biggest component of landfills, and landfills are the third largest source of methane emissions. Methane is a major factor in global warming because it is so effective at absorbing the sun's heat, which warms the atmosphere.

**And, finally, our pocketbooks:** Between 30 and 40 percent of food in the United States goes uneaten – as much as 20 pounds of food per person per month. That means Americans are throwing out the equivalent of \$165 billion in food each year.

### How Food Waste and Food Safety Are Connected

The major sources of food waste in the United States are the food industry and consumers. Within the food industry, waste occurs at every step — on the farm and with packers, processors, distributors, and retailers. Some of it is the result of economic forces, some of management problems, and some is caused simply by dumping products that are less than perfect in appearance.



But food waste by consumers may often result from fears about food safety caused by misunderstanding of what food product dating actually means, along with uncertainty about storage of perishable foods.

**WARNING:** If food is obviously spoiled – it's abnormally soft, discolored, moldy, or has a strong unpleasant smell – *discard it*, no matter how properly or how short a time it has been stored.

## Understanding Food Product Dating

Except for infant formula, dates on food products are not required by any Federal law or regulation, although some states do have requirements for them. Most of the food dates consumers see are on perishable foods, that is, foods likely to quickly spoil, decay or become unsafe to eat if not kept refrigerated at 40° F or below or frozen at 0° F or below. Perishables include meat, poultry, fish, dairy products, fresh eggs, and fresh fruit and vegetables. Makers/packers of perishable food use food dates to help ensure that consumers buy or use their products while they are at what the maker/packer considers their best quality.

- A *Sell by* date indicates that a product should not be sold after that date if the buyer is to have it at its best quality.
- A *Use by* or *Best by* date is the maker's estimate of how long a product will keep at its best quality.

They are *quality dates only, not safety dates*. If stored properly, a food product should be safe, wholesome and of good quality after its *Use by* or *Best by* date.



## Where to Learn How Best to Store Perishables and How Long They Will Keep Safely



The *FoodKeeper*, developed cooperatively by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cornell University and the Food Marketing Institute, is a complete guide to how long virtually every food available in the United States will keep in the pantry, in the refrigerator, and in the freezer. The Fresh Fruits section, for example, covers apples (3 weeks in the pantry, 4 – 6 weeks in the fridge, and — only if cooked — 8 months in the freezer) to pomegranates (2 – 5 days pantry, 1 – 3 months fridge, and 10 – 12 months freezer). The Meat, Poultry and Seafood sections are equally complete, and include smoked as well fresh products.

Access the *FoodKeeper* or download it as a mobile application:

- For Android devices — <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=gov.usda.fsis.foodkeeper2&hl=en>
- For Apple devices — <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/usda-foodkeeper/id978186100?mt=8>

The Refrigerator & Freezer Storage Chart on page 4 includes safe storage times for many widely-used foods.



## More Ways to Avoid Wasting Food

- Be aware of how much food you throw away.
- Don't buy more food than can be used before it spoils.
- Plan meals and use shopping lists. Think about what you are buying and when it will be eaten. Check the fridge and pantry to avoid buying what you already have.
- Avoid impulse and bulk purchases, especially produce and dairy that have a limited shelf life. Promotions encouraging purchases of unusual or bulk products often result in consumers buying foods outside their typical needs or family preferences, and portions — potentially large portions — of these foods may end up in the trash.

- When eating out, become a more mindful eater. If you're not terribly hungry request smaller portions. Bring your leftovers home and refrigerate or freeze them within two hours, and check the Food Keeper to see how long they'll be safe to eat.
- Check the temperature setting of your fridge. Use a refrigerator thermometer to be sure the temperature is at 40° F or below to keep foods safe. The temperature of your freezer should be 0° F or below.
- Avoid "overpacking." Cold air must circulate around refrigerated foods to keep them properly chilled.
- Wipe up spills immediately: It not only reduces the growth of Listeria bacteria (which can grow at refrigerator temperatures), cleaning up spills — especially drips from thawing meats — will help prevent "cross-contamination," where bacteria from one food spread to another.
- Keep it covered: Store refrigerated foods in covered containers or sealed storage bags, and check leftovers daily for spoilage.
- Refrigerate peeled or cut veggies for freshness and to keep them from going bad.
- Use your freezer! Freezing is a great way to store most foods to keep them from going bad until you are ready to eat them. The *FoodKeeper* has information on how long most common foods can be stored in the freezer.
- Check your fridge often to keep track of what you have and what needs to be used. Eat or freeze items before you need to throw them away.
- To keep foods safe when entertaining, remember the 2-Hour Rule: don't leave perishable foods out at room temperature for more than two hours, unless you're keeping hot foods hot and cold foods cold. If you're eating outdoors and the temperature is above 90° F, perishable foods shouldn't be left out for more than one hour.



## About Foodborne Illness

### Know the Symptoms

Consuming dangerous foodborne bacteria will usually cause illness within 1 to 3 days of eating the contaminated food. However, sickness can also occur within 20 minutes or up to 6 weeks later. Although most people will recover from a foodborne illness within a short period of time, some can develop chronic, severe, or even life-threatening health problems.

Foodborne illness can sometimes be confused with other illnesses that have similar symptoms. The symptoms of foodborne illness can include:

- Vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain
- Flu-like symptoms, such as fever, headache, and body ache

### Take Action

If you think that you or a family member has a foodborne illness, contact your healthcare provider immediately. Also, report the suspected foodborne illness to FDA in either of these ways:

- Contact the Consumer Complaint Coordinator in your area. Locate a coordinator here: <http://www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/ConsumerComplaintCoordinators>
- Contact MedWatch, FDA's Safety Information and Adverse Event Reporting Program:  
**By Phone:** 1-800-FDA-1088  
**Online:** File a voluntary report at <http://www.fda.gov/medwatch>



## REFRIGERATOR & FREEZER STORAGE CHART

These short but safe time limits will help keep refrigerated food 40° F (4° C) from spoiling or becoming dangerous. Since product dates aren't a guide for safe use of a product, consult this chart and follow these tips.

- ❑ Purchase the product before "sell-by" or expiration dates.
- ❑ Follow handling recommendations on product.
- ❑ Keep meat and poultry in its package until just before using.
- ❑ If freezing meat and poultry in its original package longer than 2 months, overwrap these packages with airtight heavy-duty foil, plastic wrap, or freezer paper; or place the package inside a plastic bag.

Because freezing 0° F (-18° C) keeps food safe indefinitely, the following recommended storage times are for quality only.

Product	Refrigerator	Freezer
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<b>Eggs</b>		
Fresh, in shell	3 - 5 weeks	Don't freeze
Raw yolks, whites	2 - 4 days	1 year
Hard cooked	1 week	Don't freeze
Liquid pasteurized eggs or egg substitutes, opened	3 days	Don't freeze
unopened	10 days	1 year

<b>TV Dinners, Frozen Casseroles</b>		
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Keep frozen until ready to heat		3 - 4 months
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<b>Deli &amp; Vacuum-Packed Products</b>		
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Store-prepared (or homemade) egg, chicken, tuna, ham, macaroni salads	3 - 5 days	Don't freeze
Pre-stuffed pork & lamb chops, chicken breasts stuffed w/dressing	1 day	Don't freeze
Store-cooked convenience meals	3 - 4 days	Don't freeze
Commercial brand vacuum-packed dinners with USDA seal, unopened	2 weeks	Don't freeze

<b>Raw Hamburger, Ground &amp; Stew Meat</b>		
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Hamburger & stew meats	1 - 2 days	3 - 4 months
Ground turkey, veal, pork, lamb	1 - 2 days	3 - 4 months

<b>Ham, Corned Beef</b>		
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Corned beef in pouch with pickling juices	5 - 7 days	Drained, 1 month
Ham, canned, labeled "Keep Refrigerated," unopened	6 - 9 months	Don't freeze
opened	3 - 5 days	1 - 2 months
Ham, fully cooked, whole	7 days	1 - 2 months
Ham, fully cooked, half	3 - 5 days	1 - 2 months
Ham, fully cooked, slices	3 - 4 days	1 - 2 months

<b>Hot Dogs &amp; Lunch Meats (in freezer wrap)</b>		
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Hot dogs, opened package	1 week	1 - 2 months
unopened package	2 weeks	1 - 2 months
Lunch meats, opened package	3 - 5 days	1 - 2 months
unopened package	2 weeks	1 - 2 months

Product	Refrigerator	Freezer
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<b>Soups &amp; Stews</b>		
Vegetable or meat-added & mixtures of them	3 - 4 days	2 - 3 months

<b>Bacon &amp; Sausage</b>		
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Bacon	7 days	1 month
Sausage, raw from pork, beef, chicken or turkey	1 - 2 days	1 - 2 months
Smoked breakfast links, patties	7 days	1 - 2 months

<b>Fresh Meat (Beef, Veal, Lamb, &amp; Pork)</b>		
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Steaks	3 - 5 days	6 - 12 months
Chops	3 - 5 days	4 - 6 months
Roasts	3 - 5 days	4 - 12 months
Variety meats (tongue, kidneys, liver, heart, chitterlings)	1 - 2 days	3 - 4 months

<b>Meat Leftovers</b>		
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Cooked meat & meat dishes	3 - 4 days	2 - 3 months
Gravy & meat broth	1 - 2 days	2 - 3 months

<b>Fresh Poultry</b>		
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Chicken or turkey, whole	1 - 2 days	1 year
Chicken or turkey, parts	1 - 2 days	9 months
Giblets	1 - 2 days	3 - 4 months

<b>Cooked Poultry, Leftover</b>		
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Fried chicken	3 - 4 days	4 months
Cooked poultry dishes	3 - 4 days	4 - 6 months
Pieces, plain	3 - 4 days	4 months
Pieces covered with broth, gravy	3 - 4 days	6 months
Chicken nuggets, patties	3 - 4 days	1 - 3 months

<b>Fish &amp; Shellfish</b>		
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Lean fish	1 - 2 days	6 - 8 months
Fatty fish	1 - 2 days	2 - 3 months
Cooked fish	3 - 4 days	4 - 6 months
Smoked fish	14 days	2 months
Fresh shrimp, scallops, crawfish, squid	1 - 2 days	3 - 6 months
Canned seafood (Pantry, 5 years)	after opening	out of can
	3 - 4 days	2 months