

Food Selection and Storage

FOOD QUALITY AND SAFETY

Storage does not improve the quality of any food. The quality of a food will also not decrease significantly during storage as long as the food is stored properly and used within the recommended time frame.

Quality is not the same as safety. A poor-quality food may be safe such as stale cereal, overripe fruit or soured pasteurized milk. An unsafe food may have good quality in terms of appearance and taste, but have a high (unsafe) bacterial count. For example, improperly canned food may contain *Clostridium botulinum* (which causes botulism) thus making food unsafe. Or cooked chicken may be placed on a plate that held the raw chicken and become contaminated. The goal of home food storage is to provide both safe and high-quality foods.

Maintaining a food's quality depends on several factors: the quality of the raw product, the procedures used during processing, the way the food is stored and the length of storage. For example, fresh-picked corn will store better than corn that has been in the market for a few days; a tightly folded inside cereal box liner will prevent a ready-to-eat cereal from becoming limp. The recommended storage time takes these factors into consideration.

Since bacteria frequently get into food through careless food handling, keep everything — hands, pantry, shelves and storage containers — clean.

SELECTION GUIDELINES

To help assure quality, some products have “open dates” on the package. Product dating is optional on most products. Dates may also be “coded” by

the manufacturer and only understood by them. The most commonly used open dates are:

- **Sell-by Date** — This is the last recommended day of sale. The date allows for home storage and use. You will find the date after the statement “sell by (a date).” Breads and baked goods may have “sell-by” dates.
- **Use-by Date** — Tells how long the product will retain top quality after you buy it. You will find this date after statement “Use by.” Some packaged goods have “use-by” dates.
- **Expiration Date** — This is the last day the product should be used or eaten. You may find this date after the statement, “Do not use after (date).” Yeast and baking powder have expiration dates.
- **Pack Date** — Canned or packaged foods may have pack dates, which tell you when the product was processed. This does not tell you how long the food will be good.

These are guidelines; if a food is not properly handled, its storage life will be shortened. Follow these tips for purchasing top-quality foods that have been handled safely.

- Look for packages of food that are not torn or broken.
- Canned goods should be free of dents, cracks and bulging lids.
- Refrigerated food should feel cold and frozen food should be frozen solid. Purchase these foods last.
- When shopping, place packaged raw meat, poultry and fish in plastic bags and keep from contact with other foods.
- Take perishable foods home quickly to refrigerate. If travel time will exceed one

hour, pack fresh meats in a cooler with ice and keep in the passenger area of the car in warm weather.

- At home, refrigerate perishable food immediately. The “DANGER ZONE” for most food is 40 to 140 °F. Bacteria grow most rapidly in this range of temperatures, doubling in number in as little as 20 minutes.

STORAGE GUIDELINES

For best results in maintaining product quality practice the rule, FIRST IN, FIRST OUT. This means you use the oldest products first and the newest products later. A good practice in the home is to place the newly purchased products in back of the same products already on the shelf. It may help to write purchase dates on products without “open dates” on the package. Follow recommended storage times for the refrigerator, freezer and pantry (see charts).

Freezer:

- Keep freezer temperature at or below 0 °F. A good indication of proper temperature is that ice cream will be frozen solid.
- Use moisture-proof, freezer-weight wrap. Examples are foil, freezer bags and freezer paper. Label and date all packages.
- Food stored beyond the recommended time will be safe to eat, but eating quality (flavor and texture) and nutritive value will be reduced.
- Keep an inventory of freezer contents.

Refrigerator:

- Use a thermometer to check temperature; it must be between 34 °F and 40 °F at all times. Avoid frequently opening the refrigerator door, especially in hot weather.
- Wrapping perishable food prevents the loss of flavor and the mixing of flavor and odors resulting in, for example, onion-flavored milk.

- Raw meat and poultry should be wrapped securely so they do not leak and contaminate other foods. Place the store packages in a plastic bag or place the package on a plate to contain any juices. Clean up leaks with warm soapy water and sanitize with a solution of 1 teaspoon chlorine bleach to 1 quart water.
- Cooked meats and leftovers should be tightly wrapped to prevent leakage and drying out.

Pantry:

- Storage cabinets should be cool and dry. Storage areas near oven ranges, hot water pipes or heating ducts should not be used because heat and moisture can cause a food to lose its quality more rapidly.
- High temperature or humidity may reduce storage time considerably.
- Insect infestation can occur in any home. Susceptible foods include cereals, flour, seeds, baking mixes, spices, candy, dried fruits and dry pet foods. Avoid purchasing damaged packages of foods and keep cupboard shelves clean. Storing food in tightly sealed glass, metal or rigid plastic containers may help.
- Pantry foods will probably be safe beyond recommended storage time, but eating quality (flavor and texture) and nutritive value will be reduced.

SOURCE:

Minch, Daryl L. *Home Storage of Foods Part I: Refrigerator and Freezer; Part II: Pantry*. Rutgers Cooperative Extension, The State University of New Jersey.

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RECOMMENDED TIMES FOR REFRIGERATOR AND FREEZER FOOD STORAGE

FOOD	REFRIGERATOR	FREEZER
DAIRY		
Fresh milk	5-7 days	*
Buttermilk	1-2 weeks	*
Canned milk (opened)	3-5 days	*
Yogurt, cottage cheese	7 days	*
Hard cheese	6-12 weeks	6-12 months
Cheese spreads	3-4 weeks	*
Ice cream	*	2 months
EGGS		
Fresh in shell	3 weeks	*
Hard-cooked	1 week	*
MEATS, FRESH		
Beef roasts, steaks	3-5 days	6-12 months
Ground beef or stew	1-2 days	3-4 months
Pork roasts, chops	3-5 days	4-6 months
Sausage	1-2 days	1-2 months
Chicken or turkey	1-2 days	9-12 months
MEATS, COOKED		
Smoked sausage, whole ham (fully cooked)	7 days	1-2 months
Ham slices (fully cooked)	3-4 days	1-2 months
Hot dogs, luncheon meats (unopened)	2 weeks	1-2 months
Hot dogs, luncheon meats (opened)	3-7 days	1-2 months
Cooked, leftover meat	3-4 days	2-3 months
Leftover gravy and meat broth	1-2 days	2-3 months
Cooked, leftover poultry	3-4 days	4-6 months
SEAFOOD		
Fresh lean fish: cod, flounder, trout, haddock, halibut, pollack, perch	1-2 days	4-6 months
Fresh fatty fish: mullet, smelt, salmon, mackerel, bluefish, tuna, swordfish	1-2 days	2-3 months
Live crabs and lobster	same day purchased	*
Live mussels and clams	2-3 days	*
Live oysters	7-10 days	*
Oysters, freshly shucked	5-7 days	3-4 months
Scallops, crabmeat, shrimp	2-3 days	3-4 months
FRUITS AND VEGETABLES, FRESH		
Apples	1 month	8-12 months
Apricots, avocados, grapes, peaches, plums	3-5 days	8-12 months
Berries, cherries	2-3 days	8-12 months
Grapefruit, lemons, limes, oranges	2 weeks	4-6 months
Pineapple	2-3 days	4-6 months
Beets, carrots	2 weeks	8-12 months
Beans, broccoli, greens, peas, summer squash	3-5 days	8-12 months
Celery, cabbage, chilies, lettuce, peppers, tomatoes	1 week	8-12 months
Mushrooms	1-2 days	8-12 months
PIES		
Chiffon pie, pumpkin pie	1-2 days	1 month
Fruit pie	1-2 days	1 year
* Storage here not recommended due to safety or quality issues		

RECOMMENDED TIMES FOR FOOD STORED IN COOL, DRY PANTRY (65 to 70 °F)

Canned fruits, tomatoes, pickles	12-18 months
Canned meats and vegetables	2-5 years
Home-canned foods	1 year
Fresh root vegetables (onions, potatoes)	1 week at room temperature or 1-3 months at 45 to 50°F

The following foods should be stored in the pantry in tightly sealed or airtight containers.

Staples

Nonfat dry milk	1 year
Pasta	1-2 years
Rice	1 year
Shortening	2 years
Sugar, granulated	indefinitely
Sugar, brown or powdered	18 months
Vegetable oil	1 year
White flour	10-15 months
Whole wheat flour	3 months (best in refrigerator or freezer)
Wild rice	6 months

Packaged Foods

Baking mix (biscuit, cake)	6 months
Cereals	12 months

Dried Foods

Dried apricots	3 months (refrigerate after opening)
Dried prunes, raisins	9 months (refrigerate after opening)
Dried peas and beans	1 year

Herbs, Spices and Condiments

Salt, cream of tartar	indefinitely
Ground spices and herbs	2-3 years
Whole spices	4-5 years
Tabasco, vinegar, Worcestershire sauce	30 months

Beverages (sealed, unopened)

Bottled water	2-5 years
Juices	12-18 months
Soft drinks	8 months

Miscellaneous

Chocolate	2 years
Chocolate chips, cocoa	18 months
Coffee (canned)	12 months
Nuts (unshelled)	6-12 months
Peanut butter	3-4 months (best refrigerated)
Tapioca	4 years
Tea	18 months

Bread and cakes

Store breads and cakes at room temperature. Storing in the refrigerator promotes staling. Use within 3-7 days or freeze.