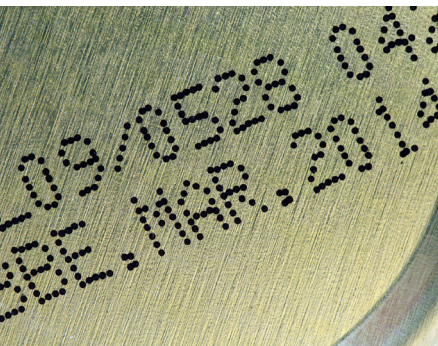




Home Storage of Foods: Shelf Storage

Fact Sheet FS274



Cooperative Extension

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Quality and Safety

We store food to make meal preparation easier, take advantage of lower prices and to be prepared for emergencies. We want food to be safe and of high quality. The quality of a food will be better if you use it within the recommended storage time.

Quality and safety are not the same. High quality food tastes, smells, and looks good. A safe food will not make you sick. However, sometimes food contains microbes that can make people ill. These include: bacteria, viruses, molds, yeasts and parasites. People need to be careful because an unsafe food may look and smell fine, but contain microbes that cause illness. For example, an incorrectly canned food may contain dangerous bacteria or toxins that will make you very sick. On the other hand, stale cereal or bread is safe, yet poor in quality. The goal of food storage is to provide both safe and high quality foods.

A food's quality depends on several factors: the condition of the raw food, how the food is made, the way the food is stored and the length of storage. For example, tightly folding the cereal box liner will prevent a ready-to-eat cereal from becoming stale. The following guidelines will help you keep food fresh and safe.

Buy Good Quality

- Buy fresh fruits and vegetables that have good color and smell and the right amount of softness or firmness for the food. Produce does not have to look "perfect"; small cuts, spots, soft spots or bruises are okay. Avoid produce that is starting to show spoilage such as mold, major soft spots or deep cuts.

- Cans should be free of large dents. Small dents, as long as they are not along the seams of the cans, are safe. Tops should be flat.
- Glass or plastic jars should have tight, flat lids. Do not buy canned or jarred food with bulging tops.
- Packaged food should be tightly closed.
- Use dates on packaged foods, if available, to decide whether or not to eat a food or how long to keep a food. Packaged or canned foods may be safe beyond the recommended storage time, but flavor, texture and nutritional value may change.
 - "Sell by date" is the last recommended day of sale in the store. These foods are safe to eat after this date, but may not taste as fresh. Examples: breads and baked goods.
 - "Use by" or "Best if Used By (or Before)" is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
 - "Expiration date" or "Do not use after" is the last day you should eat or use the food. The food may lose quality, may not work correctly in a recipe or it may be unsafe after that date. Yeast and infant formula have "expiration dates."
 - "Code date or number" is a number that the manufacturer uses to track their products. It does not tell you how long the food will be good in your home.

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Store Food Right

If a food is not handled correctly, it will not keep very long. Follow the rule: First In, First Out. This means you use the oldest foods first. Put newly purchased foods behind the same foods already on the shelf. It may help to write purchase dates on products without dates on the package.

Tips for Storing Cans, Jars, and Packages

- Keep food in cabinets or closets that are cool (less than 85° F) and dry. The best storage temperature is between 50° to 70° F. Storing food in extremely hot (over 100° F) or cold (near freezing) temperatures is harmful to canned goods and reduces quality in packaged foods.
- Avoid storing food near ovens, ranges, water pipes, hot water heaters, or other heat sources. These are not good places because heat and moisture can cause food to spoil more quickly.
- Protect food from insects. Insects may get into food in warehouses, stores or homes. It can happen to anyone, even in the cleanest homes. Foods most likely to get insects include: cereals, flour, seeds, baking mixes, spices, candy, dried fruits, and dry pet foods. Avoid purchasing damaged packages of food and keep shelves clean. Storing food in tightly sealed glass, metal, or plastic containers may help. If you find insects in a food, throw it out. Contact your local Cooperative Extension office if you need information about eliminating insects in food storage areas.
- Throw out any canned or jarred food with bulging tops, leaking food or dents along the seams of a can. Do not taste this food! It could make you very sick. Discard in the trash where children, pets and wildlife can not eat it.

Keep It Clean

Bacteria and viruses can get into food during food handling. Keep everything clean including hands, counter tops, dishes, utensils, and food storage shelves. Wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds before putting away groceries, preparing food, or putting away leftovers. This will greatly reduce the risk spreading germs and getting sick.

Summary

If you follow these basic guidelines for storing food, then you will enjoy a safe and high quality food product. The food storage chart provides the recommended length of storage for food at home.

For more information:

- Rutgers Cooperative Extension Website: njaes.rutgers.edu
- Local Cooperative Extension office. Look under "Rutgers Cooperative Extension" or "County Government" in the telephone book. County offices are listed on the website above.
- Food Safety and Inspection Service Website: fsis.usda.gov
- FightBAC!™ Website: fightbac.org

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Food	Recommended Storage Times for Best Quality Foods may be safe after the stated times; but flavor, texture & nutritional value may change. Use package dates when available.	Handling Information Store everything in cool, dry place in closed package or air tight container. Special instructions are listed below.
GRAINS		
Cereals • ready-to-eat • ready-to-cook	1 year 6 months	
Cornmeal or Hominy Grits	1 year	
Flour • All purpose, white & cake • Whole Wheat	1 year Shelf storage not recommended	Store whole wheat flour in the refrigerator (6 – 8 months) or freezer (2 years). Smell and taste may become strong or stale if stored at room temperature.
Oats – oat bran, rolled oats, steel-cut oats	1 month	Oils in oats may become stale or strong in smell or taste over time. For longer storage refrigerate for 1- 3 months or store in freezer.
Pasta	2 years	
Popcorn (un-popped)	1 -2 years	
Rice • White • Brown • Wild	1 year 6 months indefinitely	
Whole grains – barley, bulgur, cracked wheat, wheat berries, buckwheat (Kasha), Quinoa	1 month	Oils in whole grains may become stale or strong in smell or taste over time. For longer storage refrigerate 4 - 5 months or freeze indefinitely.
STAPLES		
Baking powder	18 months	May not work if kept too long
Baking soda	2 years	
Canned milk – evaporated or condensed	1 year	Invert cans every 2 months
Corn starch	18 months	
Honey	1 year	
Oils • Vegetable (corn, soybean, sunflower, canola) • Olive	6 months 2 years	
Salt	indefinitely	
Sugar • Brown • Granulated • Powdered	4 months 2 years 18 months	
Syrups – maple, pancake, corn	1 year	Refrigerate after opening

Food	Recommended Storage Times for Best Quality Foods may be safe after the stated times; but flavor, texture & nutritional value may change. Use package dates when available.	Handling Information Store everything in cool, dry place in closed package or air tight container. Special instructions are listed below.
CANNED OR JARRED FOOD		
Low-acid foods (meat & poultry, stews, soups except tomato, pasta products, potatoes, corn, carrots, spinach, beans, beets, peas & pumpkin)	2 - 5 years	
High-acid foods (tomato products, fruit, sauerkraut & foods in vinegar-based sauces or dressings)	12 - 18 months	
Home-canned foods – any type	1 year	
Bottled water (commercially bottled)	2 years	
Coffee (unopened) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can • Vacuum-packed 	2 years 1 year	
Fruit juices – canned or bottled	1 year	
Soft Drinks (carbonated soda or pop) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular can • Diet can • Bottle 	6 - 9 months 3 - 4 months 3 months	Use package dating. Bottled soda may lose fizz if kept too long and artificially sweetened soda may change in flavor.
Vegetable shortening	3 months	
PACKAGED FOODS		
Biscuit, brownie, cake or muffin mixes	9 months	
Cookies (packaged)	2 months	
Crackers	3 months	
Pancake & pie crust mixes	6 months	
Pretzels	3 months	
Sauce & gravy mixes	6 months	
Soup Mix (dry)	1 year	
Tea bags	18 months	

Food	Recommended Storage Times for Best Quality Foods may be safe after the stated times; but flavor, texture & nutritional value may change. Use package dates when available.	Handling Information Store everything in cool, dry place in closed package or air tight container. Special instructions are listed below.
DRIED FOODS		
Fruit (apricots, prunes, raisins, etc.)	6 months	Refrigerate or freeze for longer storage
Beans & peas (legumes)	1 year	If stored longer than 12 months, or exposed to unfavorable storage conditions, beans may not soften, no matter how long they are soaked or cooked.
Dry milk powder <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular • Non-fat 	6 – 9 months 12 -28 months	
VEGETABLES		
Onions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storage - Yellow, red, white • Spring - Vidalia, Maui & other sweet varieties 	3 – 4 weeks 1½ – 2 weeks	Do not store onions & potatoes together
Potatoes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baking, white • Sweet, yams 	2 months or less 1 month at 55 - 60°F; 1 week at room temperature	Do not store onions & potatoes together. Do not refrigerate or store below 45°F.
Garlic	Few weeks to few months	Depends on variety & storage conditions. Sprouted cloves may still be used, but will be milder.
Pumpkin (fresh)	1 month	
Squash – winter or hard-rinded (acorn, butternut, calabaza, etc.)	3+ months	Refrigerator storage speeds up deterioration, will only last 1 -2 weeks.
CONDIMENTS & FLAVORINGS		
Catsup, chili & cocktail sauces	1 year, unopened	
Extracts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vanilla • Other 	2 years, unopened; 1 year, opened 1 year	
Herbs	2 years, unopened; 1 year, opened	Flavor & aroma fades over time

Food	Recommended Storage Times for Best Quality* Foods may be safe after the stated times; but flavor, texture & nutritional value may change. Use package dates when available	Handling Information Store everything in cool, dry place in closed package or air tight container. Special instructions are listed below.
Hot sauces	2 – 5 years	Color change may occur after opening, but does not affect safety or taste. Better refrigerated after opening.
Mayonnaise	2 - 3 months, unopened	
Mustard	2 years	
Spices • Ground • Whole	6 months 2 years	Flavor & aroma fades over time
Vinegar	2 years unopened, 1 year opened	
Worcestershire	2 years	Refrigerate for better flavor & longer storage.
OTHER		
Chocolate & cocoa • Unsweetened • Semi-sweet • Syrup • Cocoa powder • Cocoa Mixes (hot chocolate)	18 months 2 years 2 years, unopened 1 year 8 months	
Gelatin	18 months	
Molasses	2 years	
Peanut butter	6 months, unopened 3 – 4 months, opened	Refrigerate for better quality & bring to room temperature before use.
Nuts • Unshelled • Shelled	6 months 4 months	Refrigerate or freeze for longer storage

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