

Reducing Food Waste While Keeping Food Safe

The USDA estimates that 30% of all food is discarded at the retail and consumer levels due to confusion over dates on food packages. This waste impacts food security, environmental sustainability, and farm-financial health. It also results in the waste of your personal dollars when you buy food that is never consumed. But food safety is, in fact, a critical issue: 48 million people become ill from a foodborne illness each year, resulting in 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths. Given this, reducing food waste must occur in conjunction with maintaining food safety. Below are some tips for reducing food waste, while making sure the food you have is still safe to eat.

Understanding Dates on Food Packaging

With the exception of infant formula, the federal government does not require companies to place dates on food products. Moreover, the dates that are placed on food packaging are most often dates for best flavor or quality, and not for safety. Here is what those dates actually mean:

- “Best By/Best if Used By” is the date that indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality.
- “Sell By” is the date that tells a store how long to display the product for sale.
- “Use By”, in most cases, is the last date recommended for the use of the product while it is at peak quality.

Food may be consumed past these dates if it is not showing any signs of spoilage, such as discoloration, changes in textures, smells, or mold growth. If food has developed these characteristics, it should not be eaten and should be discarded.

Federal regulations require a "Use By" date on infant formula to ensure the formula contains the appropriate quantity of nutrients, and acceptable quality. Infant formula, and the nutrients contained in it, can degrade over time so any infant formula exceeding its “Use By” date should be discarded.

With all of the confusion about product dating, and in an effort to reduce food waste, the USDA issued new guidance in 2016 to encourage manufacturers and retailers to use a “Best if Used By” date label. USDA states that this label is more easily understood by consumers, and can curb food waste and consumer expenditures on food. However, despite USDA guidance, many food manufacturers are still using the original dating system.

Storing Perishables

To complicate matters, once a package of food has been opened and exposed to the environment, all bets on safety are off. Mold and illness causing microorganisms can contaminate food that has been opened, even if the food is refrigerated. Foodsafety.gov has a food storage chart available to help you determine when food must be discarded after it has been opened. This chart can be found at <https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/charts/storagetimes.html>. In addition, USDA has developed the FoodKeeper app which can also be used to help you decide when food should be discarded. The app is available for download on both Android and Apple devices.

Other Tips to Reduce Food Waste

The EPA has developed the following tips for reducing food waste:

1. Cook or eat what you already have at home before buying more.
2. Plan your menu before you go shopping and buy only those things on your menu.
3. Buy only what you realistically need and will use.

4. Freeze, preserve, or can surplus fruits and vegetables.
5. At restaurants and all-you-can-eat buffets only order what you can finish or take home the leftovers and keep them for your next meal.

By following these tips, you can reduce food waste and the impact on your wallet, while ensuring your food is still safe to eat.

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