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WHEN TO TOSS IT?

For food that is safe and delicious to eat, proper storage is important. But no matter how well you package something, at some point it's got to go. How can you tell how long it's safe to hold onto something? In the following chart you'll find a listing of recommendations for storing various foods. It's important to note that some recommendations are safety-based, while others are for maintaining best food taste (quality).

Foods like oils, herbs, and flour simply lose flavor if they are stored for too long. If the recommended storage time for one of these foods has elapsed, but it smells fine, it will not have as good a flavor as when it was fresh but is still safe to eat, according to food processors.

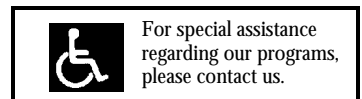
Foods like eggs, milk products, meat, chicken, seafood, and tofu, however, are subject to bacterial contamination. Eating these foods after they have spoiled could result in food-borne illnesses. Dates printed on many food products can help you decide what stays and what goes. The following information is what they mean:

- "Sell by" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. Don't buy something after this date, but if you already have it at home, it may be safe for a few more days (see table).
- "Use by" or "Best if used by" date is the last date recommended for use of the product at peak quality. It is not a safety-related date.
- "Expiration" date means don't use the product after this date.

SAFE FOOD STORAGE RECOMMENDATIONS

GRAINS				
FOOD	SHELF	REFRIGERATOR	FREEZER	COMMENTS
Flour, white	6-12 months unopened 6-8 months opened			
Flour, whole wheat	1-2 months unopened	6-8 months opened		Bring to room temperature before baking for proper leavening.
DAIRY				
FOOD	SHELF	REFRIGERATOR	FREEZER	COMMENTS
Cheese, hard		6 months unopened	6 months	Wrap well after opening.
Cheese, soft		Up to 4 weeks opened	6 months	Wrap well after opening
Milk		Up to a few days after "sell by date"		
Yogurt		Up to a few days after "sell by"		Throw out if you see mold. Clear liquid on top is

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		date"		whey—stir in.
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PROTEIN				
FOOD	SHELF	REFRIGERATOR	FREEZER	COMMENTS
Bacon, Smoked sausage		5-7 days	1 month	
Chicken, fresh		1 week	Uncooked 9 months, Cooked 4-6 months	
Eggs		2-3 weeks 3-4 days after cooking	Freeze egg whites only, 12 months	Toss eggs with even slight crack in shell.
Fish, fresh		1-2 days 3-4 days after cooking	Lean types 6 months, Fatty types 2-3 months, Shellfish 3-6 months, Cooked fish 4-6 months	
Fish or Chicken, canned		2-5 years unopened	2-3 days after opening	Transfer to glass or plastic dish after opening.
Lunch meat, store sliced		2-5 days	1-2 months	
Lunch meat, sealed in package		2 weeks unopened 3-5 days opened	1-2 months	
Meat (beef, pork, lamb)		3-5 days chops steaks 1-2 days ground 3-4 days cooked meat	4-12 months chops, steaks 3-4 months ground 2-3 months cooked meat	May be frozen up to 2 weeks in store wrap. If freezing for longer, use extra wrapping.
Nuts	1 year sealed can 2-3 months opened	4-6 months	9-12 months	First loses flavor, later becomes rancid.
Tofu		Until expiration date unopened 1 week opened	Up to 5 months (some texture change will occur)	Change water each day after opening.
OTHER				
FOOD	SHELF	REFRIGERATOR	FREEZER	COMMENTS
Oil, olive, canola, or vegetable	1 year unopened 4-8 months opened			A sharp smell means flavor quality is off, but still safe to use.
Oil, walnut, peanut, or other nuts	6 months unopened	4 months opened		
Spices and herbs, dried	2-4 years whole spices 6 months to 3 years ground spices 1-2 years unopened herbs 1 year opened herbs	Red pepper, chili powder, paprika after opening due to possible insect infestation		Store in cold dark cabinet or drawer. Don't shake over steaming pot, steam will enter jar.

Source: Nutrition Perspective, Sept/Oct 1999.

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