



How to Determine the Shelf Life of Foods

Stocking up your freezer and pantry when there's a great sale at the grocery store is a good way to save money and eat well, but it's important to know the shelf life of the food you store to ensure it's safety. Learn how to determine the shelf life of foods to keep the food in your pantry edible and healthy.

Steps

1 Check federal guidelines.

- Visit the official website of the Food and Drug Administration (<http://www.fda.gov/Cosmetics/Labeling/ExpirationDating/ucm2005204.htm>) to learn the shelf life of foods. The organization has clearly specified guidelines for refrigerating and freezing meat, dairy products and produce, and even offers a printable chart you can post on your refrigerator for quick reference. These guidelines will also provide a good basis for cleaning out your refrigerator.

2 Determine how food will be stored.

- Fresh meats usually only last in the refrigerator for 1 or 2 days, but can last for a few months in the freezer. So, where your food will be stored will determine how long of a shelf life you can expect it to have.

3 Learn the terminology.

- It's important to understand the terminology and wording on food labels and packaging to figure out the shelf life of foods. Foods labeled "use before" are considered expired and potentially unsafe for consumption after that date. The label "sell by" is more of a guide for vendors. Foods are often safe for consumption for a day or 2 after that date. Pay attention to dates on packages and what they designate as a food's shelf life.

4 Examine packaging.

- Inspect food packaging and wrapping for any tears, dents or leaks, as this could significantly lower the shelf life of food or make it unsafe to consume. Discard any meat with packaging that is torn. Re-wrap packages with small leaks in freezer paper to be safe and avoid contamination.

5 Take a look.

- Throw away vegetables that are discolored or have a sour smell, as these are probably beginning to rot. Meat that is discolored should be discarded. Milk, yogurt and other dairy products that have a sour smell, look separated or are discolored should be thrown away, because they could be spoiled. Canned goods with rust or bulges should be discarded, because they could be compromised.

6 Find the expiration date.

- All perishable foods have expiration dates on their outer packaging to serve as a guide for determining the shelf life of the food. This date is usually near the bar code or nutritional information label on the packaging. Follow this date and discard items past their listed date.

7 Throw it out if you're not sure.

- Follow the "better safe than sorry" rule when figuring out the shelf life of perishable foods and discard food if you're unclear about its expiration date or safety.

Made Recently

Did you try these steps?
Upload a picture for other readers to see.