

Kitchen Tricks to Keep Food Fresh

Has this happened to you? You go to the grocery store and buy a cart full of food you plan to use during the week. Yet somehow you never get around to eating it all. The food sits in your kitchen and eventually goes to waste.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, more than 33 million tons of food is thrown out every year! How can you keep your food fresh longer and prevent waste? Read on for tips.

HOW TO STORE FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

Fruits and vegetables that spoil quickly should generally be kept in a 38-degree to 40-degree fridge. Store them in perforated bags in the produce drawers and don't overload the drawers. Also, any food that's bought pre-cut or peeled should be refrigerated.

Foods to Refrigerate:

- Apples — if you'll have them for than 7 days
- Berries — store in a dry covered container
- Melons — once they have ripened
- Beets and carrots — cut off green tops first
- Broccoli and celery — store in crisper
- Leafy greens — wash and dry completely and store in crisper
- Corn — store with husks on
- Green beans — store in airtight container, don't snap off ends until ready to use
- Mushrooms — store unwashed in paper bag
- Peppers, squash, zucchini — store unwashed in plastic bag
- Apricots, cherries, grapes, figs, artichokes, asparagus

Foods That Should Stay Out

Fruits and vegetables stored outside of the refrigerator should be kept at room temperature, away from direct sunlight. Keep produce in a vented plastic bowl or perforated plastic bag to prevent moisture loss. Make sure you don't keep all your fruits and veggies in the same bowl, as the ethylene gas (more on this ahead) emitted from some can cause others to spoil more quickly.

Here are some fruits and vegetables that should be stored outside of the fridge:

- Apples — if you'll eat them within 7 days
- Avocado — store in a brown paper bag
- Bananas — store in a fruit bowl

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- Grapefruit —store at room temp for up to a week
- Stone fruits (nectarines, plums, etc., anything with a pit) — store in brown paper bag until ripe and then refrigerate
- Onions and potatoes — store in dark, dry place
- Lemons, limes, oranges, papayas, pineapples, watermelon, pumpkins, tomatoes

Things to Store Apart

Ethylene is an odorless, colorless gas emitted by fruits and vegetables (and other plants) that speeds ripening and can cause produce to spoil. Fruits and veggies that produce ethylene gas should be kept away from foods that are sensitive to the effects of ethylene.

In the refrigerator, keep apples, melons, and apricots away from strawberries, cherries, grapes, carrots, broccoli, celery, green beans, artichokes, asparagus, and leafy greens. On the countertop, store avocados, bananas, nectarines, plums, and peaches away from grapefruit, watermelon, lemons, limes, oranges, and potatoes.

HOW TO STORE MEAT, FISH, ETC.

Meat & Poultry should be kept in its original package in the meat drawer if you'll use it within 2 days. Otherwise, wrap it in foil and freeze. Wrap smoke meats (bacon, ham, etc.) in a vinegar soaked cloth then in wax paper and store in the fridge. Bacon can be frozen for up to a month.

Fish should be kept in a bag on top of a bowl of ice and eaten as soon as possible. You can also freeze fish or broil it and store in the fridge.

Eggs should be kept in original carton on a refrigerator shelf. Want to know if your eggs are still fresh? Put them in a glass of water. If they sink, they're good; if they float, they're bad!

HOW TO STORE DAIRY PRODUCTS

Milk should be kept in its original container in the back of the fridge, away from raw food or foods with a strong odor.

Cheese should be rewrapped in plastic or wax paper and sealed in a plastic bag. Spread butter on cut side of cheese to prevent it from drying out.

Cottage cheese and sour cream should be kept upside down in the fridge. This creates a vacuum that slows the growth of bacteria that causes spoilage.

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Butter should be kept in its original wrapper and box. Salted butter can be refrigerated for up to a month and unsalted lasts for up to 2 weeks. Butter can be frozen for 6 months.

HOW TO STORE DRY GOODS

Grains (pasta, cereal, rice, etc.) should be stored in airtight containers or in plastic bags. Put a bay leaf in the container to repel weevils, which are often found in grains.

Flour can be put in an airtight plastic bag and stored in the freezer for 24 hours to kill any bugs that are present. Remove the bag and store in pantry or fridge.

Bread should be kept at room temperature in a cool, dry place. After cutting, wrap bread in aluminum foil.

Snip the ends off **herbs**, store them upright in a glass of water, and cover with plastic bag.

Spices should only be stored in glass jars.

DECODING EXPIRATION DATES

What happens if, despite your best efforts, you're left with foods past their expiration date? It may not be as bad as you think. For the most part, food past its expiration date means that it's no longer at its best quality, NOT that it's harmful or unsafe to eat.

Much of the confusion over expiration dates is due to the variety of terms used on labels.

The **sell by** date tells the store how long to display the product. It's the last day the product is at its highest quality.

The **best if used by** date refers only to quality, not safety, and is recommended for best flavor.

The **use by** date is the last day to use the product at its peak quality.

The **expiration** date is the last date a product should be eaten

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SOURCES:

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- 3 - UC Davis. Storing Fresh Fruits and Vegetables for Better Taste. homeorchard.ucdavis.edu/fvstorage.pdf (accessed 1/10/11).
- 4 - U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Food Waste.
<http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/conservation/materials/organics/food/index.htm> (accessed 4/19/11). 