



Weill Cornell Medical College

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When Good Food Goes Bad: How to Tell if It's Safe to Eat

It's two days past the "sell by" date on the milk carton, but the milk looks and smells fine—are you running the risk of food poisoning if you drink it? How about the leftover chicken that was cooked four days ago—is it safe to eat? To minimize your risk of foodborne illness, you need to know what the dates on the food packages indicate, as well as proper storage temperatures and the shelf life of foods that have already been cooked.

What those dates mean. The majority of packaged foods are stamped with a label saying "best before," "use by," or "sell by" followed by a date.

"These terms are more about the food's quality than safety," explains Georgia Giannopoulos, RD, CDN, CNSC, a dietitian at the Weill Cornell Medical Center. "A 'best if used by' date marks when the food should be consumed for the best flavor or quality. A 'sell by' date marks how long a store can sell a product. A 'use by' date marks the last date to use the

product while at peak quality, but many foods are still safe to consume after this date."

"For example, eggs should be purchased by the 'sell by date,' but they can be used for three to five weeks after this date and still be at their best quality," says Amy Taylor, MPH, RD, CDN, a dietitian at the Weill Cornell Medical Center.

There is no absolute "expiration date" that guarantees the food is safe prior to that date or that it is harboring harmful bacteria after that date. For example, if you open a container of sour cream and there's mold in it, it's unsafe regardless of the "sell by" date. To minimize your risk of foodborne illness, you will have to rely on your common sense and your senses and adhere to safe food storage practices.

Safe storage times. Similar guidelines apply to cooked or prepared food, whether you cooked the food yourself, brought it home from a restaurant, or got it at the supermarket.

"Cooked meat or poultry, pizza, and foods you didn't prepare should be refrigerated promptly and eaten within three to four days," says



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—Georgia Giannopoulos,
Registered Dietitian
Weill Cornell Medical Center

Taylor. "Mayonnaise-based salads, such as egg salad, should be eaten within three to five days."

Both Giannopoulos and Taylor advise that cooked food should be left at room temperature for a maximum of two hours (less if possible), and for only one hour if the air temperature is greater than 90 degrees. It should be frozen or refrigerated within that time.

Continued on p2 ...

... When Good Food Goes Bad, p2

“Eating food that is left at room temperature for longer than this is unsafe, since bacteria can multiply to dangerous levels,” explains Giannopoulos.

When it comes to food safety, a visual inspection isn’t enough; the absence of mold or other suspicious spots on food does not guarantee that it won’t cause illness.

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says Giannopoulos. Her advice: “When in doubt, throw it out!”

Storage temperatures. Your refrigerator should be at a temperature of 40 degrees or below and your freezer should be 0 degrees. “The factory settings should be between 37 and 40 degrees for the refrigerator and 0 degrees for the freezer. To ensure that your appliances stay at the appropriate temperature, your best bet is to use an appliance thermometer,” advises Taylor.

Taylor refers to the temperature span between 40 and 140 degrees as the “danger zone,” since this is the prime temperature for the growth of bacteria. To lessen the risk of providing a hospitable environment for bacteria, divide large quantities of hot foods, such as soups and stews, into smaller containers before placing them in the refrigerator or freezer. “If you put a large container of piping hot stew in the fridge, the food at the center of that container will remain in the temperature ‘danger zone’ for longer than the desired two-hour limit,” says Taylor. Let hot foods cool down at room temperature for 15-30 minutes

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Carry an insulated bag or cooler in the trunk of your car; if you get delayed after a supermarket trip or dinner at a restaurant, you can protect your perishables.
- Cook or freeze fresh poultry, seafood, and ground meat within two days of purchase and beef, pork, veal, or lamb within three to five days.
- To minimize waste, arrange foods with approaching “use by” and “sell by” dates in a visible place, such as the front row of a refrigerator, pantry or cupboard shelf.

before refrigerating; otherwise, the heat generated by the food container could raise surrounding food items to an unsafe temperature.

While all foods should be stored properly, some deserve special vigilance.

“Perishable foods such as raw meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, and dairy products are at greatest risk of becoming contaminated by bacteria, since these foods spoil quickly at room temperature. Be sure to handle, store, and cook these foods properly to minimize risk of foodborne illness,” says Giannopoulos. 🍷

