

How to keep the food in your fridge fresher, longer

Storing your food the right way can save time, money and trips to the grocery store.

If you're like me, you're doing much more cooking at home this month than ever before, as the world hunkers down in quarantine in response to the coronavirus outbreak. That means keeping tabs on what I have in the fridge and thinking strategically about how I shop when I do need to leave the house to go to the grocery store, including how I touch items around me and practicing 6-foot social distancing.



While knowing when it's time to purge your fridge of certain foods that have gone past their prime is important, so is preserving the life of your milk, eggs, fruit, vegetables and meat. There are some surefire methods for prolonging the shelf life of your fridge food, including keeping perishable dairy items in the coldest part of the fridge, and using a surprisingly simple kitchen staple to keep away lettuce rot.

Of course, keep in mind that the FDA recommends keeping refrigerated foods at or below 40 degrees. And the Mayo Clinic says that after four days, the risk of harmful bacteria increases. So it's a good idea to perform the sniff and feel test before eating any items that have been sitting in the fridge for a while. If something smells or looks off, it isn't worth the risk.

Keep your greens fresher for longer

Once your salad, spinach and other greens start looking dark, wet or slimy, they're no longer any good. You'll notice they have a less earthy green smell and more of a pungent aroma. And if you don't have time to turn them into a pesto sauce, you can make them last longer with the help of a simple kitchen tool -- paper towels.

When you buy herbs like cilantro or a bunch of spinach, wrap a paper towel or two around them to absorb any moisture from the grocery store water spray, which can cause mold. For plastic tubs of greens like salad, layer some paper towels throughout the tub -- three should do the trick -- to keep villainous moisture at bay.

If you'd rather go green, TipsMake sister site Chowhound recommends using produce bags, storage containers and reusable paper towels after rinsing your greens to make them last longer. They also recommend poking small holes in the plastic bags you do use in order to promote greater air circulation.

When you're ready to eat your greens, make sure you rinse them to remove any lingering bacteria. You can also prewash your greens, like romaine lettuce leaves, and let them dry completely before storing them wrapped in towels for the fridge. If any individual leaves look like they're decaying, toss them out, but give the container a good sniff, too.



Keep your milk and other dairy foods from going sour too soon

If you've noticed the milk and other dairy items you buy seem to be some of the first to spoil, it's probably because you're storing them the wrong way. You may think as long as you put them in the fridge immediately after use they'll be okay -- but that's not always true.

TipsMake's smart home team thoroughly tests refrigerators using industry standards in order to find the best ones -- and here's what they've found. Your refrigerator temperature isn't even, with some spots typically colder than others. For example, the back of the fridge tends to stay chillier, so it's a much better place to store milk than the side door.

Not only is the door more temperate than the back of the fridge, you also expose food at the front of the fridge to warm kitchen air every time it opens. Dairy and other perishables should stay fresher several days longer when kept in the back.

A common tip suggests putting just a pinch of salt into milk after opening to make it last a week longer past its expiration date. Full disclosure: We haven't tried it. If you don't think you'll be able to drink the milk before it expires, the Dairy Council of California states you can freeze it and thaw it out when you're ready to drink it.

However, make sure you're following your own common sense and smell the milk before drinking. If it smells sour or looks clumpy when you pour it into a glass, toss it out immediately. The same goes for other dairy products, like yogurt, heavy cream and sour cream.



Prevent your cheese from growing mold

To keep your cheese from growing mold too soon, the American Cheese society recommends removing it from its plastic wrapping and rolling it up in wax or parchment paper instead. To go greener, get a reusable food wrap like Bees Wrap. You'll want to change the wrapping periodically either way.

The American Dairy Association suggests storing most cheese at or below 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Soft cheese like brie and cottage cheese should last a week at these temperatures. Hard cheese like cheddar can typically go three to four weeks.

If your cheese ever has an overly dry or slimy texture, it's best to discard it.

Preserving your tomato paste

Unless you're baking a pizza from scratch, chances are you're not going to use all of the tomato paste from the can at once. You can help keep it fresher by adding a thick layer of oil over the top of the paste.

When you're ready to use it again, pour or spoon the oil off the top. If you still have some tomato paste left that you plan on using at a later time, pour on more oil to cover it.

If black rings form around the inside edges of the can after you stick it in the fridge, this is often dried and oxidized paste. Avoid it when spooning out the red tomato paste. You can also use a paper towel and scrape it

off, or scoop out the fresh paste and store it, covered with oil, in a separate container.



Keep your meat fresh

FoodSafety.gov guidelines say lunch meat should be tossed after three to five days if opened. Raw bacon lasts one week and fresh ground meats (sausage, hamburger) will only last one to two days. Meats like steaks, chops, roasts and ham can last up to five days in the fridge.

If any of these meats have been sitting in your fridge for longer, you need to cook it or freeze it. If not, the meat will start to go bad and you'll have to throw it out. Cooking it will help give it an extra three to five days of life in the fridge, and months more life in the freezer.

Some foods, like fish, are better left in the trash if they haven't been cooked within a day. As always, though, make sure you smell your food before you cook it, to lower the chance of food-borne illness.

Don't let your eggs spoil

Along with dairy products, eggs should also be stored in a cool spot in your fridge. That means keeping them out of the door and instead near the back of the fridge.

If you're not sure they're still good and the sell-by date is overdue, you can conduct the egg test. Fill a bowl with water and place in one egg at a time. If the egg sinks to the bottom, it's good to eat. If it floats, it's time to toss it out.

Toss any deviled eggs that have been sitting out for several hours. Since they're made with perishable items like mayonnaise, they can't stay at room temperature for long. However, if you've refrigerated them, you can safely eat them up to two days later.



Make your fruit last longer

Berries, like strawberries and raspberries, are known to grow mold fast. Once this happens, you should avoid eating them. However, Chowhound recommends preserving fruits by washing them in distilled white vinegar and water, rinsing them with water and waiting until they're completely dry before storing them in the fridge.

Once the berries are dry, place them in a new container lined with a paper towel and keep them out of the crisper drawer, which is more humid.

Need more kitchen tips? Check out these foods you need to purge from your fridge and how to unclog a kitchen sink using things you already have around the house.

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