

Food



One of the most avoidable sources of waste in our trash is food. Fortunately, there are many steps you can take to reduce wasted food.

Eat the food you buy



Start reducing food waste by eating the food you buy. Keep track of the freshness of your ingredients, and check the cupboards and refrigerator before buying more. Look up recipes based on whatever you need to use up first.

It is helpful to create a designated spot for “eat first” foods in your refrigerator or pantry to help other family members notice, too. And don’t forget to eat or freeze leftovers or items about to spoil.

Involve your kids in making meals. This can involve a little more work (and mess), but generally kids are more likely

to eat something they have helped create. This helps start your kids off on the right foot by teaching them to cook, explore, and enjoy more foods.

Exposing kids to a variety of foods is important, but this doesn’t have to result in a lot of waste. Serve small portions to encourage exploration but avoid too much waste.

Encourage your family to bring home any food in their lunches they didn’t eat to have later. Serve leftover food as snacks, incorporate into new meals, or send it again the next day for lunch. For ideas on what to pack and containers to pack it in, visit a blog such as 100 Days of Real Food at 100daysofrealfood.com/school-lunches.

“When my son gets home from school and asks for a snack, we first check his lunch and have him eat whatever he skipped before we offer him more food. If fruit or veggies get brown or mushy from sitting in his lunch all day, we set them aside for smoothies, stir-fries, or roasted veggies. If my son isn’t hungry, we often include what’s left in his lunch on his plate at dinner. This ensures he eats healthy and we prevent wasted food.” – mom from St. Louis Park

Practice meal planning



Meal planning involves preparing for meals and snacks in advance. There are many different approaches you can take to meal planning, and it's important to find what works for your household.

Some people like to plan out every meal for each day of the week or month, while others like to create general ideas and leave flexibility for what they eat each day. Here are some examples of meal-planning approaches you could try:

- Schedule-based: Look ahead in your schedule and plan easy or quick meals for busy days.
- Theme-based: Set daily themes that give you a starting point, such as pizza night, crockpot meals, soup, pasta, or tacos.
- Ingredient-based: Work backward from the staples you keep on hand and find recipes that use them in different ways.

Other ideas for taking the guesswork out of meal planning are to repeat recipes you already know, plan days to eat up leftovers, and create a "household cookbook" of meals you know are tried and true.

Putting meals together in batches is a good way to make life and meal prep simpler. You can create individual or family sized portions of fresh or frozen foods, often for the week ahead.

When you plan meals, you can go to the grocery store with a list to buy exactly what you need and no more. Make your shopping list based on how many meals you'll eat at home. Then look in the refrigerator and cupboards first to avoid buying food you already have.

Make a list each week of what needs to be used up and plan upcoming meals around that. Remember that casseroles, stir-fries, frittatas, soups, and smoothies are great ways to use leftovers. Search for websites that provide suggestions for using leftover ingredients. Many apps and websites exist to help you get started (such as [savethefood.com/articles/10-easy-tips-for-meal-planning](https://www.savethefood.com/articles/10-easy-tips-for-meal-planning))

The U.S. EPA has a food waste reduction toolkit with printable worksheets available at [epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/food-too-good-waste-implementation-guide-and-toolkit](https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/food-too-good-waste-implementation-guide-and-toolkit). The toolkit contains the following worksheets to help you buy, store and prep foods:

- Smart Shopping: Shop with Meals in Mind
- Smart Prep: Prep Now, Eat Later
- Smart Storage: Fruits and Vegetables Storage Tips

Understand food labels

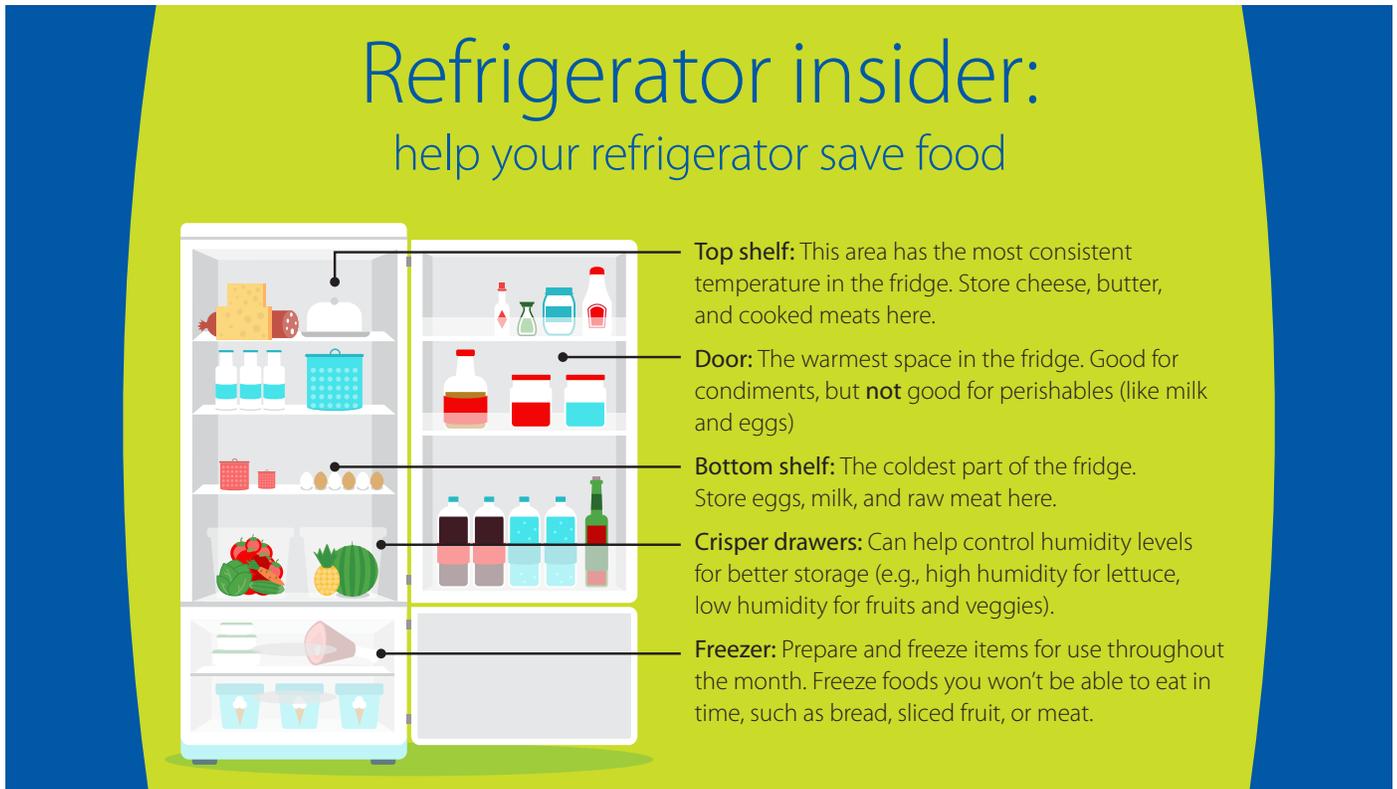
There is no universally accepted system for dating food in the United States. The only federally regulated food labeling is on baby formula to ensure the nutrient levels listed on the packaging are accurate until the expiration date. The dates on food labels are generally not expiration dates but merely suggestions as to when the product is at its freshest.

Labels like "use by" and "best if used by" describe product quality, not safety. Use your sense of smell, sight and judgment to determine when food has gone bad. Don't use foods that have developed an off odor, flavor or appearance.



Properly store your food

Did you know that where you put food in your refrigerator can contribute to how long it lasts? Make sure you follow some basic guidelines explained in the graphic below about where to store foods based on the average temperatures in your fridge.



Other food storage tips:

- Keep the fridge temperature at 40 degrees or colder. Bacteria do not like the cold.
- Store fruits and vegetables separately from each other as fruits emit natural gases that accelerate ripening and can make other nearby produce spoil faster.
- Wait to wash berries until you want to eat them to prevent mold.
- Freeze food such as bread, sliced fruit, or meat that you know you won't be able to eat in time.
- Don't keep perishable food, such as bread or wine, on top of the fridge. The fridge gives off heat that can make foods spoil faster.
- Prepare and cook perishable items then freeze them for use throughout the month. For example, cook and freeze chicken breasts or taco meat.

To refrigerate, or not to refrigerate?

Yes

Apples, berries, cherries, grapes, kiwi, lemons, oranges
Most vegetables
Fresh herbs, wrapped in a damp towel or in a container

Yes, but...leave out at room temperature until ripe and then refrigerate:

Melons, nectarines, apricots, peaches, plums, avocados, pears, tomatoes

Not necessary – these store well outside of the refrigerator, in a cool, dry place (unless cut up):

Bananas, mangos, papayas, and pineapples
Potatoes, onions (keep in a dark place)
Winter squash

To find more information about proper storage to make your food last its longest, check out [savethefood.com/food-storage](https://www.savethefood.com/food-storage).

Start a garden and eat local

Growing your own produce is a great way to reduce packaging and ensure that your fruits and veggies are eaten at peak freshness. If you don't have a yard or an area big enough for a garden, you can get a plot at a community garden. Ask your neighbors or explore your neighborhood resources to find a garden near you.

You can also grow quite a few herbs and small vegetables in pots. Growing your own herbs can help you prevent waste by allowing you to only pick the amount you need per time.

Another way to reduce the impact of your meals is to eat local foods that are in season. This reduces the carbon emissions generated by transporting foods across the country or globe. Here are some examples of cookbooks to help get you started:

- Eating Local by Sur La Table
- Edible: A Celebration of Local Foods by Tracey Ryder and Carole Topalian
- Mark Bittman's Kitchen Express – 404 inspired seasonal dishes you can make in 20 minutes or less by Mark Bittman
- The Birchwood Cafe Cookbook by Tracy Singleton
- The Minnesota Homegrown Cookbook by Tim King
- The Perennial Kitchen by Beth Dooley

