

# Poach OR Pitch

## FOOD EXPIRATION DATES AREN'T ALWAYS THE DECIDING FACTOR.

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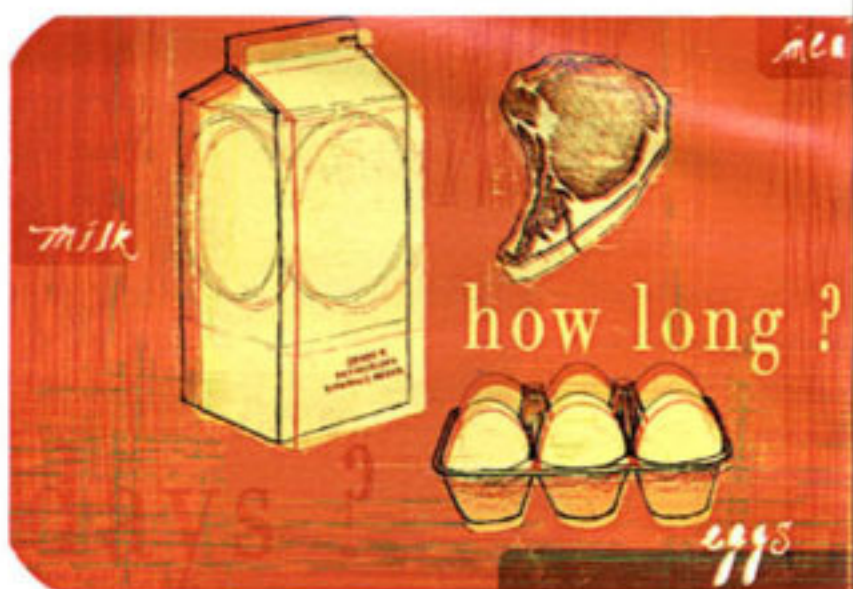
Three things that weigh over 300 pounds: A male bighorn sheep. A newborn elephant. The amount of food you throw out each year. That's right—the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that, on average, each person in the United States throws out about 328 pounds of edible food each year. Food bought with the best intentions sits for weeks on end as busy consumers tuck it in the refrigerator and forget about it. And when it seems time to either eat it or toss it, most people rely on the freshness dates (a.k.a. 'use by,' 'sell by,' and 'best if used by') printed on the packages.

But, according to the USDA, these dates don't really guarantee food safety, nor do they mean expired food is always bad. In many cases, you may be throwing food out unnecessarily. And that's hard on your wallet, your conscience, and the aching back of your trash collector. It pays to know when your family's food is still perfectly good and when you are justified in tossing it. Here, then, is a quick guide to the shelf lives of some of your favorite foods stored in refrigerators set at an optimal 40 degrees.

### MEATS

Poultry, seafood, and ground meats such as hamburger, have the shortest shelf lives. They should be consumed within two days of purchase if stored in the refrigerator. They last up to six months in the freezer. Steak, beef, pork, and other fresh-cut meats last a little longer—three to five days in the refrigerator and six months in the freezer.

The life of lunchmeat depends on whether it's prepackaged or freshly sliced from the supermarket delicatessen. "Vacuum-sealed, prepackaged products generally come with a sell-by or use-by date, but once the product is opened, four days is the longest you should keep these meats," says Catherine Donnelly, Ph.D., professor of nutrition and food science at the University of Vermont.



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Like opened lunchmeat packages, fresh deli-cut meat falls into the four-day category. Only buy what you can use in the next few days. The exception is the dry sausages, such as summer sausage or dry salami. Because they're cured, dried, or fermented, they'll last up to three weeks, says Robert Post, Ph.D., director of USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service Labeling and Consumer Protection Staff.

### DAIRY

The date stamped on milk products is set by the dairy. "Most of the dates on dairy products are totally driven by freshness—not necessarily spoilage," says Donnelly. The freshness is when the products taste best, but they're often perfectly edible for some time afterwards. In general, milk lasts five to seven days after the sell-by date. Bottom line: Don't throw milk, cream, or other fresh dairy away because it's past the due date. Give it the sniff test to see if it's still good.

Cheese is different. A good rule of thumb: The older and harder the cheese, the less likely to harbor food borne pathogens. "If you look at aged, hard cheeses like cheddar and Parmesan, they have very long shelf lives. The acidity, salt content, and lack of moisture are all barriers to the growth of organisms," explains Donnelly. If it's really moldy, toss it. Otherwise, simply cut away the mold to get to the good cheese.

Soft cheeses such as Brie, Gorgonzola, or blue are very susceptible to pathogens because of their high moisture content. Check the dates carefully. Once you open them, use them that same day. Throw out leftovers.

### EGGS

Eggs generally have long shelf lives—three to five weeks from the time you take them home. And, since most eggs will be cooked, there is less of a safety concern. Don't throw them out if they're past the expiration date; crack one open first. If it still smells and looks good, fry away.

When you cook them, make sure you do so thoroughly. About 1 in every 10,000 eggs contains salmonella bacteria. Thorough cooking kills salmonella. Once cooked, a boiled, unpeeled egg will last a week.

### CANNED AND BOTTLED FOODS

For the most part, dates on processed foods are strictly an indication of optimal freshness. The chance of pathogens being in commercially canned and bottled products is almost nonexistent.

Commercially canned and bottled foods are first boiled then placed in airtight containers. As the food cools, a vacuum seal is formed, preventing new bacteria from entering.

"Under normal conditions, nothing can grow in cans," says Donnelly. "Over time you might get some chemical deterioration, but otherwise, canning is a pretty effective preservation method." So if it still looks, smells, and tastes good, you can eat it, no matter how much time has passed.

Once the container is opened, all bets are off. To be safe, use within one week. If you're not sure when that can of ravioli was opened, toss it out. Same with any other food that you have doubts about. You want to minimize waste, but you don't want anyone to get sick. ☺

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