

## When to Toss it? Food Expiration Guidelines

In my house, I am constantly asked, “Are you sure this is still good? It says that it expires today!” And no matter how much I explain that the dates on packages don’t come straight from the mouth of God, no one seems convinced! Finally, here’s the food-by-food guide on when to hold ‘em and when to walk (or throw) away (with apologies to Kenny Rogers). And be sure to check out what some of the terms actually mean by reading [5 Rules that FINALLY Decode Food Label Dates](#) (hint: when reading a package label, “sell by” doesn’t mean “use by”!).

So when should you *really* get rid of those refrigerator and pantry staples?

- **Eggs**, refrigerated immediately after purchase, can be kept 3 weeks after their sell by date. Forget the old-school way of placing the egg tray on the fridge door! Store [eggs](#) in their original carton, in the body of the fridge where the temperature is coolest. Once the egg is cooked in a dish like a frittata or quiche, toss after 3-4 days. Hardboiled eggs are good for a week. Love eggs? Try this low-cost family recipe for [southwestern baked eggs](#).
- **Milk** can still be consumed 1 week beyond its sell by date, but do the smell test! Pour some into a glass and smell from there. This helps twofold. By pouring into a glass, you can see if the milk has curdled (time to toss), and you won’t get a false positive — meaning you’ll think it’s gone bad when it’s actually still good. Secondly, the sour odor can come from dried up milk on the rim of the container and not from the still-fresh milk itself. As with eggs, storing milk on the shelf instead of on the door can help make it last longer.
- Unopened **yogurt** will still be good 2 to 3 weeks past the sell by date. But still do the smell test!
- **Cottage cheese**, [a healthy snack choice for kids](#), doesn’t last as long as yogurt – so use within 10 days of expiration if unopened. Once opened, consume within 7 days.
- **Whole-wheat flour** needs to be stored in the refrigerator or freezer, while all-purpose flour holds up well in the pantry. Why? The nutrient-rich germ left on the whole-wheat flour has natural oils that become rancid with time. Refrigerated, [whole-wheat](#) flour will last 6-8 months. Frozen, it will last up to 2 years.
- **Oats** will keep for up to a year when stored in a cool, dry place.
- **Dry pasta** will keep in the pantry for up to 2 years.
- Never purchase or use **canned goods** that are dented, bulging, or oozing! These are telltale signs that the food has been contaminated and may cause botulism. Otherwise, canned goods stored in a cool, dark place can often be eaten years after their expiration date, as long as the can is intact.
- **Canned beans**, with intact cans, will keep for up to 3 years when stored in a cool, dry place. Plus, they’re great to keep in stock so you can whip up quick and easy dishes to bring to [barbecues](#).
- **Tomato sauce**, unopened, will keep for 1-2 years after it’s expiration date. Once opened, it will last 5 days refrigerated (although I go longer sometimes).
- Commercial, jarred **salsa** will keep up to 18 months if unopened. Once opened, you have up to 2 months after the best by date. Homemade salsa, on the other hand, has a

shorter fridge life. Homemade salsa can be eaten within 7 days, depending on the ingredients. Speaking of salsa, try this [tasty homemade mango salsa](#).

- **Mayonnaise**, if opened and stored properly in the fridge, will last up to 3 months after the “best by” date.
- **Deli Meats**, like ham and turkey, unopened and refrigerated, will last up to 2 weeks. If it’s been opened, you have 3 to 5 days before the cold cuts start declining in quality. If you’re buying in bulk but don’t plan on using it right away, keep only what you need in an airtight container in the fridge and freeze the rest for up to 2 months.
- **Chicken Breast**: Ever have days where you forget that you were defrosting chicken breast for dinner? Good news! You can still use thawed chicken for up to 2 days as long as it was refrigerated properly. Can you re-freeze thawed [chicken breast](#)? If they were defrosted in the fridge (kept at a temperature below 41°F), then you’re good to go. Upon re-thawing, you have 2 days to consume the chicken breast. If you initially defrosted the chicken breast under running water, then do *not* re-freeze—use it by the next day. If you purchased already frozen chicken, it will last up to 9 months in the freezer.
- **Ground meat** is tricky because it has a ton of surface area for bacteria to grow on. If refrigerated immediately, your ground meat will be safe to use for up to 2 days after the sell-by date. We make it a habit to cook it the same day! Frozen ground meat will keep up to 4 months after the sell-by date. Try this [turkey or lean meat Bolognese with veggies and pasta](#) that your kids will love.
- **Fruits and vegetables** have a lot of variability in terms of how long they stay fresh. Check out this [resource](#) to learn more about when to toss specific fruits and vegetables, but know that chopping them up will speed up the spoilage process (remember: more surface area = more space for bacteria!). Typically, cut-up fruit is good for about 3-4 days and shouldn’t be frozen after it’s been cut for 4 days, frozen veggies will last up to 8 months in the freezer, and frozen fruit will last up to a year. Fruit usually has about a 3-5-day shelf life once ripened. To increase the shelf-life of fresh veggies, store them away from fruit: fruit releases a ripening agent that can cause vegetables to ripen too quickly and spoil.

Now that you know when foods actually expire, write down the date when a food was opened on the label with a permanent marker. This is especially useful for soy milk, soups, mayonnaise, [salad dressings](#), and other foods that aren’t completely used right away. You can even tape this list to your fridge as a friendly reminder of when to hold and when to toss away. Now that you know when to toss and when to keep, you’ll have a better answer for the non-believers who insist that an expiration date is law (unless, of course, it’s on [baby food](#)—in which case, yes, toss it out!).

## References

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