How to Tell if Something's Spoiled

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It is often quite apparent when certain foods have expired, but it can be a bit more tricky to discern with other foods, such as freezer foods. Generally speaking, any food that has a foul smell or has changed texture is spoiled and should not be consumed. With some general rules and guidelines, you can know when food has expired, including the trickier types, such as frozen or pantry food.

Method 1

Method 1 of 3:
Knowing when Produce and Pantry Food is Spoiled

1 **Look for soggy edges.** Leafy vegetables will become soggy and/or slimy when they are spoiled. If left for too long, they will begin to turn brown and develop a slimy coating. Discard any leafy vegetables that look like this, as they are inevitably spoiled.[1]

- You will also notice obvious signs of spoilage in carrots if they are softer and a paler orange color than before.

- Grapes will "deflate" and become mushy and soft.

- Mold will appear on citrus fruits when they are spoiled, or they may become soft and have a deflated look.

- Tomatoes will become wrinkled and will dry out.

2 **Examine cruciferous vegetables for discoloration.** [2]   It can be apparent when your head of lettuce has gone bad, but not as easy to tell with cruciferous vegetables, such as cauliflower. Examine the surface of the florets (a flowering stem that makes up the head of broccoli or cauliflower). If there are dark brown or gray speckles on it, it is in the beginning stages of spoiling. The speckled sections can be trimmed off and the rest used, since the vegetable does not spoil all at once.[3]

- If you see dark spots all over the florets, snap off a few.

- Cut the floret in half lengthwise.

- If there is discoloration throughout the floret, throw it out. Any florets without discoloration are usable.

- Throw out the entire vegetable if it has become soft and mushy, or if it has mold or insect damage.

3 **Throw the item out if you see mold.** Mold is a definitive indicator that your vegetables or fruits have spoiled. Mold often looks like a fuzzy white, green, or dark-colored spot or spots. Mold can contain bacteria that will make you sick or can be poisonous. Do not risk it.

4 **Look for limp stems.** Limp stems are indicative of overall wilting of the plant, which is due to the loss of turgor pressure in the plant's cell walls. The cell walls collapse inward as they lose moisture, causing the leaves and stems to wilt. If left for too long in this state, they can begin to become soft, slimy, and mushy, thereby making them unsafe to eat. But if caught early, they can be revived.

- Place the greens or vegetables in a sink or large container of ice water for 15-30 minutes.

- Drain the sink or container and pat the vegetables or greens dry.

- Store in the refrigerator in a plastic bag with dry paper towels to absorb excess moisture. This will prevent the vegetables from spoiling too quickly.

5 **Check for staleness.** Though they are still technically safe to eat, stale foods indicate that it is past its prime. Foods that are stale will not be as crunchy or as soft as they once were, depending on what the food is. Though the quality of flavor has been compromised, it is still safe to eat.[4]

6 **Examine food for change of texture.** [5] Most shelf stable foods are safe indefinitely, but if you notice a change in texture, the quality may be compromised. For example, if you notice that any liquids, such as vinegar or oils, have separated, that product may no longer be fresh and/or usable.

- If you are still unsure as to whether or not the food is unspoiled, take a whiff. If you notice an odd or foul smell, you may want to toss that food.
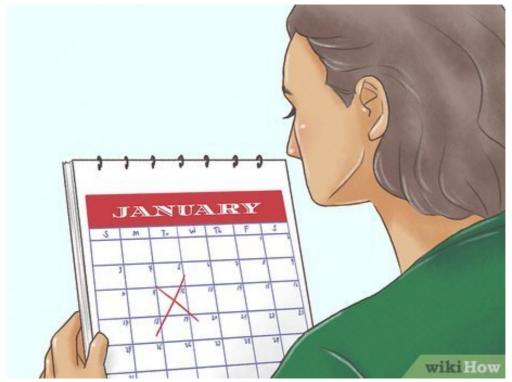
7 **Inspect cans for rust, dents, or swelling.** A can that is bulging or has a broken seal should be immediately tossed. Swelling indicates that the food inside has spoiled.

- Check the can for any corrosion, which can indicate a problem with the food inside.

- If the food inside looks moldy, or cloudy when it should be clear, toss it. If you notice an unpleasant odor or gassiness inside the can or jar, dispose of it.

- Canned food that is spoiled may contain bacteria that can cause botulism, which could be fatal. Exercise extreme caution if you notice anything unusual with your canned food.[6]

1 **Toss if you see freezer burn.** Freezer burn is the occurrence of ice crystals or frost inside of food that is a result of the frozen food losing its moisture. Food with freezer burn is technically still safe to eat but the texture and flavor is likely to have changed drastically and may not taste as good as if it were fresh.[7]

- Freezer burn often occurs as a result of poor packaging, which would allow water molecules to migrate out of the food. Prevent freezer burn by packaging food well before freezing it.

2 **Keep food frozen for no more than three to four months.** If left much longer, it is susceptible to freezer burn and the texture will be compromised. This goes for food that is raw, cooked, or prepared in some way. You can better preserve your food by using a plastic bag and squeezing all of the air out of it before sealing the bag completely and placing it in the freezer.[8]

3 **Inspect frozen meat.** Unwrap the meat and smell it. If it smells foul or unpleasant, it has spoiled. If you are still unsure, thaw it in the refrigerator for no longer than two days. After it has thawed, touch the meat to check for stickiness. If it feels sticky or tacky to the touch, it most likely spoiled and should not be consumed.[9]

- Check the meat for changes in color. Color that has faded or darkened can be indicative of spoilage.

**Method 3 of 3:
Knowing when Refrigerated Food is Spoiled**

1 **Check your eggs.** The best way to tell if an egg is spoiled or not is to crack it and see if it gives off a foul smell. If the egg is giving off a foul smell, toss it immediately, as it is most likely spoiled and not safe for consumption.[10]

2 **Inspect milk before drinking.** If your milk begins to have an abnormal texture, odor, or color, discard it.[11] Any of these changes indicate that it has spoiled and is not safe for consumption. Milk can generally be consumed up to seven days after the "sell-by" date on the container.[12]

3 **Toss deli meat if it becomes slimy.** If unsure as to whether or not your deli meat has expired, feel the surface of the meat. If it is slimy or has developed a film over the surface, discard it. It is likely not safe to eat. Furthermore, you can inspect the meat for any discoloration or dark spots. Any gray, brown, green, or black spots is indicative of spoilage and should be discarded immediately.[13]

4 **Discard spoiled meat.** When you purchase meat, use it within a few days or freeze immediately if you do not plan to use within that timeframe. If you have left your meat in the refrigerator for longer than that, inspect it for any off smells and or changes in color. In addition to becoming slimy and unappealing to the eye, it can also become greenish-brown when it has spoiled. Toss it immediately if you notice this is the case.[14]

- Raw poultry and raw ground meats can remain in the fridge for one to two days.

- Raw red meats that are cut into steaks or chops can remain in the fridge for three to five days.

- Cooked meat and poultry can last three to four days in the fridge.

⑦ Expert Q&A

Question

Do expiration dates matter on food?

JoAnna Minneci
Professional Chef
Expert Answer

Usually, you shouldn't go by the expiration date on the package, unless it's baby formula. What really matters are color changes, smell changes and consistency changes. That said, be extra careful with proteins, as they usually go bad quickly.

Helpful 0   Not Helpful 0

Question

Is spoiled food really that dangerous?

JoAnna Minneci
Professional Chef
Expert Answer

Yes! It's cheaper to throw it out than it is to go to the ER, and food poisoning is not a joke. You can get super sick.

Helpful 0   Not Helpful 0

💡 Tips

- Clearly label the date that you bought food on the package so that you know when you bought it and how long it's been in your refrigerator.

⚠ Warnings

- Do not attempt to consume foods that appear to be spoiled, as they can make you sick and could potentially be fatal.[15]

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This article was co-authored by JoAnna Minneci. JoAnna Minneci is a Professional Chef based in the Nashville, Tennessee area. With more than 18 years of experience, Chef JoAnna specializes in teaching others how to cook through private cooking lessons, team-building events, and wellness and nutrition classes. She has also appeared in numerous television shows on networks such as Bravo and Food Network. Chef JoAnna received Culinary Arts training from the Art Institute of California at Los Angeles. She is also certified in sanitation, nutrition, kitchen management, and cost control. This article has been viewed 42,455 times.

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