



Increase the Shelf Life of Your Food – Check Your Refrigerator

Everyone knows that if you leave food in the refrigerator for too long, it will spoil. By applying proper storage techniques, you can increase the shelf life and the safety of your food.

Why does food go bad?

Have you ever seen mold on fruits, vegetables, or leftovers or a layer of slime on deli meats or vegetables? If you have, then you know the typical signs of spoilage. Spoilage of refrigerated foods is caused primarily by microorganisms such as bacteria, yeast, or mold that are naturally present in the food or that contaminate the food through poor refrigeration practices.

How cold temperatures increase shelf life

The first step in extending the shelf life of refrigerated foods, as well as in increasing their safety, is to keep food cold. Many consumers keep their refrigerators too warm—that is, at temperatures above 40°F. Lowering the temperature of your refrigerator to between 34°F and 38°F can increase the time it takes for food to spoil. Cold temperatures slow the

growth of spoilage microorganisms, which need water, nutrients, and the proper temperature to grow. When food temperatures are cold—40°F or colder—the environment becomes less than ideal for the damaging microorganisms, which will continue to grow, but much more slowly. Therefore, it will take longer for the food to spoil or become unsafe.

Some microorganisms in food are harmful to humans. If cold temperatures are not maintained, these organisms can begin to grow and make food unsafe before there is any sign of spoilage. By keeping food sufficiently cold, the growth of harmful microorganisms also is slowed.

Monitoring refrigerator temperatures

Turning down the temperature of your refrigerator is quite simple—just turn the control knob inside your refrigerator.

Typically, the control is on the wall of the refrigerator. Check your owner's manual to determine which way to turn the knob to decrease the temperature. In some models, "1" is the warmest setting, and in others it is the coolest.

It is also important to monitor the temperature of your refrigerator, as home refrigerators often fluctuate greatly in temperature. After adjusting the control, check that your refrigerator temperature stays between 34°F and 38°F. Put a thermometer inside the refrigerator near the door to keep track of the temperature. You can buy a refrigerator thermometer for about \$5

at a grocery store, discount store, or department store.

Tips for refrigerated storage

- Use plastic bags or aluminum foil around commercial packaging, or place the product on a plate to prevent raw juices from dripping on other foods or refrigerator surfaces.
- Refrigerate products that carry "*Keep refrigerated*" or "*Refrigerate after opening*" labels.
- Store meat and poultry in the back of the refrigerator rather than in the door. The back is colder.
- Store uncut, whole produce in the crisper where it is more humid.
- Keep the refrigerator sanitized. Routinely clean the inside and outside surfaces with soapy water. Rinse and then wipe surfaces with a solution of one tablespoon of unscented bleach per gallon of warm (not hot) water to remove mold spores.
- Date undated products so they may be used within a safe time.
- Use dated products within a safe time.
- If the refrigerator fails or the power goes off, keep the door closed; within four hours, cook the products, or place them in an environment that is 40°F or colder.

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