

**EXTENSION**

FCS-3509

Food safety at food pantries: Guidelines for safe handling, storage and donation of foods

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Food donations provide essential support to individuals and families in need, helping ensure access to nutritious meals. However, not all foods are safe to donate, and items that are poorly handled or stored can pose health risks. Choosing high-quality foods, keeping them in good condition and following safe handling practices helps maintain food safety, freshness and nutritional value for those receiving them.

Handling food safely

Before donating food, make sure it has been stored and handled safely. Food safety begins with clean hands and proper packaging. Wash hands thoroughly before handling food, and ensure containers, jars and packaging are clean and intact. Avoid donating foods with broken seals, bulging cans or visible mold. If donating perishable items, keep raw meats, poultry and seafood separate from ready-to-eat foods to prevent cross-contamination. Fresh produce should be free from bruising, spoilage or mold, and foods in airtight, leak-proof containers help prevent spills and contamination during transport. If you are unsure whether an item is safe to donate, it is best to leave it out.

Storage of perishable and shelf-stable foods

Before donating perishable foods such as dairy, meat, poultry or eggs, confirm that they have been kept at safe temperatures to prevent spoilage and foodborne illness. Refrigerated foods should be stored at 40 F (4 C) or below, and frozen foods at 0 F (-18 C) or below. Shelf-stable foods, such as canned goods and boxed meals, should be stored in a cool, dry place away from heat or moisture. Check use-by or best-by dates and donate items well before expiration so food pantries can distribute them safely. At home, rotate your pantry so older, unopened items are donated first. Packaging condition is also important; make sure the cans are not dented, leaking, rusted or bulging. Eggs should remain in intact cartons, and milk or yogurt should be cold to the touch when delivered.

Non-refrigerated foods and contamination risks

Non-perishable foods should be kept away from chemicals, cleaning products and pet food during storage or transport. Avoid donating items that are leaking, sticky or crushed, as they may not be safe. When moving or storing food, use clean boxes or bags to prevent contamination. If packaging is damaged or missing a seal, or if a food has an unusual color, texture or odor, it should not be donated.

Knowing how long foods can safely last helps ensure donated items are still good to eat and reduces food waste. For example, dry cereal and pasta can often stay fresh for up to two years if stored in a cool, dry place. Eggs can remain safe for about five weeks past the sell by date if kept in the refrigerator and frozen vegetables can last up to eight months when stored properly. Spices can retain their flavor for six months to three years depending on the type and storage conditions. Checking dates and storing food correctly helps make sure everything donated to families is safe and high-quality.

Table 1: Examples of extended shelf life of food

Food	Approximate extended shelf life
Dry cereal	Up to 2 years
Dry pasta	Up to 2 years
Eggs, in shell	Up to 5 weeks
Milk, liquid	About 1 week
Yogurt	About 2 weeks
Frozen vegetables	Up to 8 months
Spices	6 months–3 years

Food can remain safe to eat for days, months or even years depending on the type and how it's packaged. However, it should not be eaten or donated if the packaging is damaged, leaking, bulging, rusted, cracked or missing a seal. Do not donate food that has an unusual color or smell. Perishable foods such as meat, fish, poultry or dairy should also be discarded if they feel warm before cooking. When in doubt, throw it out.

Resources such as the USDA FoodKeeper App provide guidance on safe storage times and temperatures for a variety of foods. Considering these factors helps ensure that donated foods remain safe, high-quality and beneficial for pantry clients. Proper attention to handling, storage and packaging builds trust in the donation process and supports the health of those receiving food.

References

- Are you storing food safely?* (2025, November 3). U.S. Food and Drug Administration. <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/are-you-storing-food-safely>
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