



EXTENSION

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Guide to donating food to local food pantries: What to give and how to make the most impact

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Introduction

Charitable food organizations are non-profits that distributes food to people in need at no cost. They work through food banks, food pantries and meal programs. Each plays a special role in helping communities with food insecurity.

Food banks are large organizations with warehouses and refrigerated trucks. They can collect and distribute large amounts of food, including fresh produce and other perishable items when storage is available. Food pantries, are smaller, community-based locations that give food directly to families.

Feeding America is a national network that links food banks to farmers, grocery stores, distributors and wholesalers. This helps ensure donated food reaches communities efficiently. Knowing how these organizations work helps donors give food that is useful and safe.

What food you can donate

When donating, focus on shelf-stable or nonperishable items that are still good to use. Food labels in the U.S. may vary:

- Best if Used By/Before: Shows when the food tastes best. Not a safety date.
- Sell-By: Guides stores on how long to display the product. Not a safety date.
- Use-By: Shows when the product is at peak quality. Not a safety date (except for infant formula).
- Freeze-By: Suggests when to freeze food for best quality. Not a safety date.
- High-demand items include:
 - Dairy: milk, cheese, yogurt
 - Fresh fruits and vegetables
 - Lean proteins: canned tuna, chicken, beans
 - Non-refrigerated items: olive oil, salad dressings, marinades, whole grains

Choose foods that are easy to store, transport and distribute. This helps donations reach people safely.

Things to consider

Food banks can usually only accept perishable items that need refrigeration, like fresh meat, dairy, or produce, if they can store them safely. Always check with your donation sites before donating perishable items.

Avoid food with:

- Damaged packaging (dented, bulging, rusted or leaking cans)
- Glass containers that could break

This keeps food safe and high-quality for families in need.

How to locate food pantries in your area

To donate, find your nearest food bank using the Food Finder app or Feeding America's "Find Free Food and Groceries" page. Many food banks also accept monetary donations. Money helps them buy what is needed and cover costs. Sometimes monetary donations are more helpful than food as this allows food banks to purchase items they need in bulk. Most food banks also welcome volunteers if you would like to help them operate.

Whether donating food, money or your time, your contribution helps families get nutritious meals and supports local food security programs.

References

Feeding America. What to donate to a food bank and what to avoid. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-blog/what-to-donate-food-bank-and-what-to-avoid>

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Peer Reviewed

Nila Pradhananga

Nutrition state specialist, OSU Extension



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