

EMERGENCY FOOD: EXPIRATION & BEST BEFORE DATES

CHALLENGES FOR EMERGENCY FOOD PROVIDERS

Emergency food providers rely mainly on donations, which can raise a variety of issues relating to expiration and best before dates. According to emergency food providers in Guelph & Wellington, these challenges include:

- No definitive guidelines exist about when to discard canned foods.
- Emergency food providers may lack the resources to inquire to manufacturers about the production dates.
- History of the food may be unknown, making it difficult to know how long it can be stored.
- Constantly changing volunteer and staff at food banks and pantries make training difficult and some are unaware of the difference between 'expired' and 'best before'ⁱ.

A number of organizations provide programs on safe food handling for local emergency food providers. These include Food Banks Canada Safe Food Handling Programⁱⁱ, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency resources, and Food Safety Training and Certification offered by Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Healthⁱⁱⁱ. In accordance with the guidelines outlined by these programs, emergency food providers are diligent in their efforts to check the expiry dates and condition of all donations before being distributed to the public^{iv}.

IS IT OK TO EAT?

- **Expiration dates** are required on fortified foods, such as infant formula or liquid nutritional supplements. **Fortified food should NOT be eaten if the expiration date has passed^v.**
- **Best before dates** must appear on pre-packaged food with a shelf life of 90 days or less^{vi}. Foods with an anticipated shelf life greater than 90 days are not required by law to be labelled with a "best before" date, although some manufacturers and retailers choose to include one. **You CAN buy and eat foods after the "best before" date has passed as long as they have been stored properly.** However, when the date has passed, the food may lose some of its freshness, flavour, texture and/or nutritional value^{vii}. It is also important to note that best before dates apply to unopened products only and once opened, the shelf life a food may change^{viii}.
- Canned goods have a long shelf life, which means they don't require a best before date. Food manufacturers generally recommend that canned goods be stored for no longer than one year for best quality. **Do NOT eat foods from cans that show signs of bulging, leaking, or denting at the seam or rim^{ix}.** Denting at the seam or rim of a can does pose a risk to the safety of a food. In addition, severe denting in the body of the can also poses a risk, as the coating on the inside may be damaged, resulting in contamination of the product^x.

- Jams/jellies, nuts, pickles, and flour can be stored up to 12 months from production at room temperature before being consumed. Spices and dried beans can be stored up to 24 months from production^{xi}.
- Foods packaged in cans, bottles, jars and bags should be stored in a dry storage area. The dry storage area should have a moderate temperature (10C to 21C). To preserve quality, such food should not be exposed to sun light. The food should be stored 15cm off the floor and walls^{xii}.

HOW TO MAKE FOOD LAST LONGER

- **Canned goods:** Practice the “first in, first out” rule. When stocking your pantry, bring older foods to the front and newer purchases to the back.
- **Fruit:** Fruit can be stored at room temperature, but will begin to spoil and mold quickly after it has ripened. If fruit starts to ripen and you’re not using it right away, put it in the fridge. Fresh fruit can also be frozen^{xiii}.
- **Vegetables:** Root vegetables including potatoes and onions should be stored in a cool, dry place such as a cold cellar or cold room. Other vegetables should be refrigerated. Vegetables can also be frozen.
- **Milk products:** Butter, cheese and cream products can be frozen. Always thaw frozen milk products in the refrigerator. Hard cheese (cheddar, swiss) that has mould can be salvaged if they are trimmed at least one inch from the edge of the mould^{xiv}.

IF IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT

- Fortified foods, such as infant formula or liquid nutritional supplements should not be eaten if the expiration date has passed^{xv}.

- Some foods can be extremely harmful to your health, even if consumed in small amounts. The following are a few examples of food that should be thrown out if they show signs of mould: yogurt, hot dogs, open canned ham, peanut butter, jams and jellies and bread^{xvi}.
- Boxed food with an inner bag should be discarded if the bag is torn, leaking or contaminated. Boxed food without an inner bag should not be used if the box has been opened^{xvii}.
- Glass food containers should be thrown out if: the lid is loose or safety seal is bulging, the container is cracked or chipped, or the product shows signs of mould or unusual product separation^{xviii}.

WHAT TO AND WHAT NOT TO DONATE

Emergency food providers in Guelph and Wellington suggest the following as ideal foods to donate:

- Non-perishable food that is high in nutritional value (i.e. cereals that are high in fibre or soups that are low in salt).
- Fresh produce
- Dairy
- Meat
- Personal items such as toothpaste, soap, shampoo, etc.
- Baby formula and food
- Beans and lentils
- Canned fish and meat
- Dried pasta and tomato sauce
- Peanut butter

Emergency food providers encourage those making donations to check expiry and best before dates before bringing items in. It was also noted that home preserves or processed foods from a home kitchen cannot be distributed to the public^{xix}.

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ⁱ Deb Cripps, Fred Aleksandrowicz, Sandi Leach, personal communication, November 2011

ⁱⁱ Food Banks Canada (n.d.). Safe food handling program. Retrieved from <http://foodbankscanada.ca/About-us/Programs/Safe-Food-Handling.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ Food Safety Training and Certification (n.d.). Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health. Retrieved from: <http://www.wdgppublichealth.ca/?q=businessfoodcert>

^{iv} Deb Cripps, Fred Aleksandrowicz, Sandi Leach, personal communication, November 2011

^v Canadian Food Inspection Agency (2011). Date labelling on pre-packaged foods. Retrieved from: <http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/concern/tipcon/date.shtml>

^{vi} Canadian Food Inspection Agency, 2011.

^{vii} Canadian Food Inspection Agency, 2011.

^{viii} Canadian Food Inspection Agency, 2011.

^{ix} EatRight Ontario (n.d.). Food safety – canned foods. Retrieved from:

<http://www.eatrightontario.ca/en/ViewDocument.aspx?id=225>

^x Sarah Croteau, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, personal communication, January 2012.

^{xi} Federal/Provincial/Territorial Committee on Food Safety Policy (October 6, 1999). Model guideline for food safety in food banks. Retrieved from: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/alt_formats/hpb-dgpsa/pdf/legislation/food_bank-banque_alimentaire-eng.pdf

^{xii} Sarah Croteau, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health, personal communication, January 2012.

^{xiii} EatRight Ontario (n.d.). Safe food storage. Retrieved from:

<http://www.eatrightontario.ca/en/ViewDocument.aspx?id=226>

^{xiv} Federal/Provincial/Territorial Committee on Food Safety Policy, 1999.

^{xv} Canadian Food Inspection Agency, 2011.

^{xvi} Federal/Provincial/Territorial Committee on Food Safety Policy, 1999.

^{xvii} Federal/Provincial/Territorial Committee on Food Safety Policy, 1999.

^{xviii} Federal/Provincial/Territorial Committee on Food Safety Policy, 1999.

^{xix} Deb Cripps, Fred Aleksandrowicz, Sandi Leach, personal communication, November 2011