

Natural Health News

October 2018

EVERGREEN SPA & WELLNESS
ELY, MN

THE SCARY STATISTICS ABOUT FOOD WASTE



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According to a recent report from the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), about 40 percent of all the food produced in the United States ends up being tossed. That means 8 out of every 20 slices of bread, 5 eggs per dozen, a breast and a leg from every rotisserie chicken—produced with the same amount of energy, water, food and fertilizer as the 60 percent we do eat—dumped into a landfill to rot. Food waste is at an all-time high—50 percent greater than it was in the 1970s. Households throw out more food than grocery stores and restaurants combined, accounting for 43 percent of total food waste. A family of four tosses \$ 1,800 worth of food a year, according to an analysis by the non-profit organization Rethink Food Waste Through Economics and Data (ReFED). Also, research shows that health-conscious people and those concerned about foodborne illness are the worst culprits. Of course, growing food that nobody eats isn't just hard on our wallets, it's also hard on the environment. Twenty-one percent of agricultural water in the U.S. goes to food that gets wasted, 19 percent of croplands grow produce that's later tossed, and 21 percent of landfill content is rotting food—which in turn produces a whole lot of methane, a greenhouse gas 21 times more potent than carbon dioxide. The problem is so great that some states have begun regulating it. Vermont is banning food from entering landfills after 2020. However, the saddest fact is that we could feed all the hungry people in the U.S. with less than a third of the food we throw out. Given the terrible consequences of tossing so much food—an estimated 68 percent of which is edible—calls for immediate action in every household to do better. According to research, at the most basic level, household food waste happens because the modern American tendency to shop infrequently is at odds with basic human abilities to predict future food consumption needs. People have a hard time knowing what they will want to eat a few days down the line. And planning meals for a whole week—and sticking to that plan—is practically impossible. We overestimate, for example our desire for variety—so we buy a bunch of different breakfast foods, but end up eating pretty much the same thing each morning. Life plays a role too. We plan to make pasta with vegetables for dinner on Wednesday, but come Wednesday night we get home late and don't have time to cook, or the kids insist on something else, and those veggies wither and end up in the trash a few days later. People also tend to over-buy when they feel resources are abundant, which they generally are in our country. Homes are more than double the size they were decades ago, kitchens have more storage and fridges are bigger. So we fill them up, which provides more opportunity for food to go bad and be wasted. Research shows that big bulk stores like Costco encourage us to buy larger amounts as well, since the items tend to be cheaper on a per-serving basis. However, when jumping at bargains, people don't take into account the cost of the food they inevitably waste. And then, there is the food label factor. Best by, sell by, use by—almost every packaged food has a date stamped on the label, often preceded by one of these phrases. What many people don't know is that none of these terms is regulated or standardized by the federal government with the exception of infant formula. Typically, these dates simply indicate how long the manufacturer estimates the product will remain at top quality. But many customers see them as markers of food safety, or are confused about what they mean. As a result, studies show that people tend to toss food as soon as it approaches or passes the date on the label. They are throwing it out because they are worried it's no good anymore and it could make them sick. In fact, confusion over date labels leads 80 percent of Americans to prematurely discard safe, edible food.

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LABEL DATE TERMS decoded:

SELL BY: This label is meant for the *retailer*, not the consumer. It lets the folks who stock the shelves know that a product shouldn't be sold after that date to ensure peak quality. It is *not* an indication of food safety.

BEST BY, OR BEST BEFORE: Terms like these indicate the food company's best guess as to how long the product will keep at its peak quality. They don't have to do anything with food safety.

USE BY: OK, this one is confusing. Both the FDA and USDA say that this phrase has to do with quality and is not related to safety except for infant formula. However, new guidelines from the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) and Food Marketing Institute (FMI) define "use by" as a hard cutoff date—after which the product may not be safe. Because these conflicting recommendations are voluntary, there is no way to know whether the product carries the FDA's definition (it's OK to eat after that date) or GMA's/FMI's (it's not).

No matter what phrase you see, experts say not to freak out and automatically toss a food because it is approaching or just over the label date. Use your best judgement. Eyeball it. Give it a sniff. If it doesn't look spoiled, have an off odor and has been stored properly, it is probably fine. A few exceptions: if you are pregnant or have a compromised immune system it is not worth the risk. Also, deli meats, uncooked hot dogs, unpasteurized milk, soft cheeses, raw sprouts, melons and smoked seafood can harbor *Listeria*—bacteria you can't see or smell—even at fridge temperatures. Don't take any chances with those.

Moldy cheeses: For hard cheeses, just cut off the mold and a small margin of the untainted cheese around it and eat it. Furry soft cheeses, like brie, need to be tossed.

Freezer-burned vegetables: They may not look pretty, but experts say they are perfectly safe to eat. To make the freezer-burn less detectable, toss them into casseroles, risottos or fried rice.

Sprouted potato: Is safe to eat but discard the sprouts and any green parts, which contain solanine—a substance that could cause severe gastrointestinal issues. To prevent sprouting, store your potatoes in a dark, dry place.

Onion with a brown layer inside: Needs to be tossed! There are several bacterial pathogens, including *salmonella*, that can cause decay like this. They enter through the neck of the onion where the green shoots come out. Don't eat the onion raw! However, if it is well cooked, removing the rotten layer and a few adjacent ones should be okay.

The top 5 wasted foods and what to do with them before they go bad:

1. **Dairy products:** most dairy is pasteurized, making it very safe. Give it the sniff test before you toss it. Cheeses and yogurt can also be frozen.
2. **Vegetables:** About-to-turn produce is great in dishes like stir-fries, soups and omelets that wilt the veggies anyway.
3. **Fruit:** Bag it, date it and freeze it for smoothies or jam. Or cook it down to a compote or make salsa to serve alongside meat or fish.
4. **Grain products:** Cooked grains are the biggest culprit here, so try using leftover rice or quinoa in a breakfast bowl with veggies and a fried egg. Sliced bread can be frozen and later toasted. Process stale bread in the food processor and freeze for the next time you need homemade breadcrumbs.
5. **Meat, poultry and fish:** Make stews and chilis—anything that fully cooks the protein—which can then be frozen. Or cook meat and poultry thoroughly and freeze for tacos.

A FUTURE WITH LESS FOOD WASTE

Research shows that if every household in the country curbed their food waste by even a modest 25 percent, it would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by more than 7 million tons a year—which is equivalent to taking 1.5 million cars off the road. And then there is the annual family savings. Here are some simple steps to reduce food waste:

1. If you tend to do one big grocery run and over-buy ingredients, shop for dinner (the meal that most often gets scrapped) several times a week.
2. If you often forget leftovers in the fridge, pack them in single-serving containers for lunches the night you make the meal or bring it home from a restaurant. If you freeze them, be sure to label and date the leftovers and put them on your list of planned meals for the week—so the freezer doesn't act as a food-waste halfway house.
3. If you toss food because you can't remember when you put them in the fridge or freezer, get into the habit of labeling everything. Keep a sharpie and a roll of masking tape right next to your fridge/freezer and jot down the date you made the dish. Also, organize your fridge with the newest items in the back and the oldest in the front where you can see it.
4. Make a pact with yourself to only buy items in bulk or on sale if you have the opportunity to use it. Research shows that shoppers who stick to their grocery lists are less susceptible to impulse buys, spend less on groceries and don't waste as much.
5. Be realistic, strategic and creative with your meal plans.

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