

The Life Span of Food



By **Dustin Driver**

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They lurk in the unknown depths of your fridge, waiting to unleash their putrid attacks upon innocent snackers. They're the forgotten leftovers, and every year they gross out millions of guys around the globe. Unfortunately, we think of the fridge as a cryogenic chamber that's capable of keeping food in suspended animation indefinitely.

Pizza from last month? No problem, it's been in the fridge. Leftover pasta from Valentine's Day dinner? Sure! But even at a chilly 40 degrees, mold and bacteria can thrive. Leftovers and fresh food can be crawling with microscopic bugs that could make you sick.

So exactly how long can food be kept in your fridge before it goes bad? It depends, and if it doesn't have an expiration date, it could be difficult to determine. Some foods have superior life spans, while others decay at an alarming rate. Keep reading to find out the life span of food that you're stashing in the back of your fridge right now.

Meat

Life span: Two days to a week

If you grabbed some ground beef at the market, make your burgers or pasta sauce right away. Fresh meat -- fish, beef, pork, and poultry -- won't last longer than two days in your fridge.

Leftover cooked meat will kick around a bit longer, but as a general rule, try to eat it within a week.

Cooked pork chops should be gobbled up sooner, within three days. Your holiday ham and other smoked or cured meats can hang in there for one week. Make lots of ham sandwiches and hash if you don't want it to go to waste. Bacon, unless frozen, has a similar shelf life.

Death rattle: A good general rule is that if it smells bad, it is bad. Meats, fresh or cured, will stink when they're rotten or even beginning to turn. Red meat and pork chops will also turn grayish in color. Fish will smell, well, really fishy. Fresh fish

should have virtually no odor, just like sushi. Poultry is probably the most difficult to pin down. Raw chicken will smell sour and could develop a slick film when it goes bad.

Cheese

Life span: One week to two months

Cheese is essentially curdled milk, a pretty shelf-stable dairy product. Still, it can -- and will -- succumb to mold. Soft and stinky cheeses -- cottage cheese, cream cheese, blue cheese, Camembert, and feta -- should be eaten within a week.

Hard cheeses like cheddar and

Parmesan will stay fresh for up to two months. So go ahead and invest in that two-pound block of Parmesan.

Death rattle: When you see mold on a soft cheese, throw it out. By the time mold becomes visible, it's already infected the whole lot. Of course, some cheese is intentionally moldy, like blue cheese. Keep tabs on it and look for any red or white mold. If a hard cheese starts growing mold, cut it off and eat the rest; the mold won't affect the flavor.

Condiments

Life span: Three months to a year

People went nuts when the U.S. government classified ketchup as a vegetable in school lunches, but school penny-pinchers were probably just trying to save a dime. Although it possesses dubious nutritional value, ketchup will keep for eight to 12 months; some even say it lasts up to two years.

Mayo used to be relatively unstable. Thanks to pasteurization, however, modern mayo will stay fresh for up to six months. Relish, which is essentially a slurry of preserved veggies, will survive in your fridge for a year. Mustard is hearty; it can kick around your fridge for up to eight months.

Salad dressing may separate into an unsightly science experiment if you let it sit for too long, but it'll still taste good after nine months of storage.

Soy sauce is a lightweight among condiments, lasting only about three months in the fridge after it has been opened. Butter, when refrigerated, will last up to a year before it becomes inedible.

Jams and jellies are called preserves for good reason. A jar will last you a year, barring any late-night peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich parties. Natural maple syrup or Aunt Jemima will last just as long.

Death rattle: Condiments don't exactly publish obituaries. Mold of any color, shape or texture is a good sign that it's time to toss them.

Cooked vegetables and grains

Life span: Three to seven days

The life span of cooked veggies is shorter than that of the fresh variety -- be sure to eat that leftover broccoli within three days of cooking it. Soup shouldn't be slurped down after it has been in the fridge for more than three days. Leftover pasta has a pretty good shelf life: A well-sealed bowl of the stuff will stay good for up to five days.

Rice seems benign, but it can turn on you. The same starch that fuels your long workouts can fuel bacteria that can give you terrible [indigestion](#) and even make you sick. If you steam a pot of rice, throw it out after seven days in the fridge. Any other stews or leftovers should be eaten within a week.

Death rattle: Thanks to Tupperware, it's exceedingly tough to tell when leftovers have turned. Look for dried-out bits around the edges. Mold is a dead giveaway. Give your food a sniff: If it doesn't smell like it did when you cooked it, it's more than likely gone bad.

Alcohol

Life span: Three days to 10 years

Big-name beers, which have been pasteurized and filtered, will keep longer than microbrews; in fact, they'll last about three months. If you store your beer at room temperature (shame on you), however, it could go bad in a month. In general, follow the freshness date printed on the label, and if you have doubts, take a swig.

Unopened white wine can turn sour within a year, while red wine -- if stored in a cool, dark place -- can last for decades. Once you open your wine, keep it in the fridge; heat turns wine into vinegar. In fact, "vinegar" is a derivative of the French words "vin" (wine) and "aigre" (sour).

If you're not careful, wine will easily turn on you. If you put the cork back in and store it upright in the fridge, your wine will last up to three days before the flavor starts to change. After about a week, you'll have yourself a good bottle of vinegar. Spirits such as rum, gin, vodka, whisky, and brandy have no expiration date.

Death rattle: Beer doesn't usually get to lounge around in the fridge, but it will start to taste flat, sour and bitter when it's on life support. Some wines, of course, are meant for aging. Others will simply taste worse over time. When in doubt, seek out a good wine store and consult a sommelier. If you ever encounter a bulging cork on a wine bottle, it's a bad sign. Toss it right away.

Canned foods

Life span: One to two years

Contrary to what you might think, canned foods don't last forever. All canned goods, if stored in a cool, dry place, will keep for about a year. Some can keep even longer.

Death rattle: Open it up and give it a sniff. If it smells sour, toss it. If the can is bulging at all, toss it without opening it. The bulge could be bacterial growth or even botulism, which is a food poisoning that can be fatal.

Frozen foods

Life span: One month to a year

Just because it's kept at a freezing-cold temperature doesn't mean it'll keep forever. Ice cream and sorbet have the shortest life spans of any frozen food -- only about a month. A whole chicken or [turkey](#), on the other hand, will stay fresh for up to a year. Most everything else falls somewhere in between.

Frozen veggies are good for three months. Bread will last three months as well. Ground beef can last up to four months, and chicken parts can stay good for nine months.

Death rattle: Freezer burn is actually more like desiccation, where the food dries up. The surface of anything in the freezer, when exposed to the super-dehydrating air, will dry out. Ice cream or sorbet will develop ice crystals. If you see these crystals, throw out the container instead of bearing the taste of the rough, dry yet pasty outcome.

know your snack's life span

Keeping your food in suspended animation may be easy on your pocket book, but it could be bad for your health. If you have doubts about your leftovers, trash them. Food poisoning is a steep price to pay for saving a few cents by stretching your leftovers.