

CHECKLIST: FOOD SAFETY

When you live in a hoarded home, food safety is often compromised—expired items mixed with good food, lack of refrigeration, pests, or just not knowing what's safe to eat. This checklist helps you identify what food is safe, what needs to be thrown away, and how to store food safely in your own space.

Important: When in doubt, throw it out. Food poisoning is not worth the risk.

Time Needed



Varies

(5 minutes to check an item;
30 minutes to audit your food)

When to Do This

Before eating something you're unsure about; when organizing food in your room; regularly to check supplies

General Food Safety Rules

☐ The Golden Rule: When in Doubt, Throw It Out

- If it smells bad → toss it
- If it looks weird → toss it
- If you're not sure → toss it
- If it's been there forever → toss it
- **Food poisoning is serious—don't risk it**

☐ Trust Your Senses

- **Smell:** Off, sour, rotten, unusual smell = bad
- **Look:** Mold, discoloration, sliminess = bad
- **Texture:** Slimy, sticky, dried out (when it shouldn't be) = bad
- **Taste:** If it made it past the smell/look test, taste a tiny bit—if it's off, spit it out

☐ Check Dates (But Understand What They Mean)

- **"Sell By"** = Store guideline; food is often good past this date
- **"Best By" or "Best Before"** = Quality date; might be less fresh but usually safe
- **"Use By"** = Last date recommended for peak quality; use judgment after
- **"Expiration Date"** = Don't use after (especially for baby food, medications)
- **No date?** Use your senses and good judgment
- The web site [Eat by Date](#) lets you search different foods to see how long they stay good

Checking Specific Foods

Shelf-Stable Foods (Unopened)

☐ CANNED GOODS



SAFE if:

- Can is intact (no dents, rust, bulging, or leaking)
- Past date by a few months usually okay if can looks good
- Smells normal when opened



TOSS if:

- Can is bulging, swollen, or hissing when opened (botulism risk—SERIOUS)
- Can is rusted through or leaking
- Food looks or smells bad when opened
- Can is severely dented (especially seams)

☐ DRY GOODS (Pasta, Rice, Cereal, Flour, Crackers)



SAFE if:

- Package is sealed or tightly closed
- No signs of bugs or rodent damage
- Smells normal
- Looks normal (no mold, discoloration)



TOSS if:

- Bugs present (weevils, moths, etc.)
- Evidence of rodent chewing or droppings
- Smells stale or rancid
- Visible or smelled mold
- Package is open/exposed for unknown time

☐ BREAD and BAKED GOODS



SAFE if:

- No visible mold
- Smells normal
- Texture is normal (not slimy or hard)
- Within a few days of purchase (or frozen)



TOSS if:

- ANY visible or smelled mold (even one spot—it's throughout)
- Smells off or sour
- Slimy or discolored
- **Tip:** Bread molds FAST—keep in fridge or freezer if you can

☐ CHIPS, SNACKS, COOKIES



SAFE if:

- Package sealed or recently opened
- No stale or rancid smell
- Tastes normal



TOSS if:

- Package damaged or open for long time
- Tastes stale or rancid (especially oily foods)
- Bugs present
- **Note:** These usually don't make you sick, just taste bad

Refrigerated Foods

If your fridge isn't working properly or you don't have consistent refrigeration, be **EXTRA** careful with these items.

☐ **DAIRY (Milk, Yogurt, Cheese)**



SAFE if:

- Smell is normal
- Texture is normal
- Within date (or a few days past for milk if it smells okay)
- No visible mold on cheese (except on hard cheese—cut 1 inch around mold)



TOSS if:

- Sour smell (except yogurt, which should smell tangy but not putrid)
- Chunks/separation that won't remix (milk)
- Mold on soft cheese or yogurt
- Slimy texture
- **Temperature rule:** Dairy should be kept consistently at 40°F or below

☐ **MEAT, POULTRY, FISH: HIGH-RISK FOODS—BE VERY CAREFUL**



SAFE if:

- Fresh and used within 1-2 days of purchase (if refrigerated properly)
- Frozen solid until ready to use
- Smells normal
- Color is normal for that meat



TOSS if:

- Smells bad (sour, rotten, ammonia-like)
- Slimy or sticky texture
- Gray or green color
- Past date
- Been at room temperature for 2+ hours
- **Don't taste raw meat—if unsure, toss it**

If you don't have reliable refrigeration, avoid raw meat entirely or buy shelf-stable options (canned tuna, jerky, etc.)

☐ **EGGS**



SAFE if:

- Within 3-5 weeks of purchase (in fridge)
- No cracks
- Passes float test: place in water—if it sinks, it's fresh; if it floats, it's bad



TOSS if:

- Cracked shell
- Rotten smell (you'll know immediately)
- Floats in water

☐ LEFTOVERS



SAFE if:

- Refrigerated within 2 hours of cooking
- Eaten within 3-4 days
- Smells and looks normal
- Reheated to steaming hot (165° F)



TOSS if:

- Been in fridge more than 4 days
- Smells off
- Slimy or moldy
- You don't know how long it's been there
- **"When in doubt, throw it out" ESPECIALLY applies here**

Fruits & Vegetables

☐ FRESH PRODUCE



SAFE if:

- Firm texture (for items that should be firm)
- No mold
- No soft spots or excessive bruising
- Smells normal



TOSS if:

- Mold anywhere (can spread even if you don't see it)
- Slimy or mushy
- Smells rotten or fermented (when it shouldn't)
- Excessive bruising or damage

Tips:

- Cut away small bruises or bad spots on firm produce like apples and potatoes
- Toss it entirely if it's soft produce with mold like berries or tomatoes
- Store produce in the fridge if you can; room temperature shortens its life

Storing Food Safely in Your Room

If you need to keep food in your room (limited kitchen access, food insecurity, etc.):

☐ **Choose shelf-stable foods**

Best options:

- ☐ Crackers, granola bars, cereal (be sure to watch for crumbs)
- ☐ Peanut butter (doesn't need to be refrigerated after opening)
- ☐ Canned goods (tuna, soup, fruit, vegetables)
- ☐ Dried fruit, nuts
- ☐ Instant oatmeal, ramen
- ☐ Shelf-stable milk boxes
- ☐ Jerky, protein bars

☐ **Store properly to prevent pests**

- ☐ Keep food in sealed containers (plastic bins with lids, ziplock bags)
- ☐ Don't leave food wrappers in your room overnight
- ☐ Clean up crumbs immediately
- ☐ Take trash out regularly (take it to school to throw away if necessary)
- ☐ Keep food off the floor
- ☐ Use airtight containers for anything opened
- ☐ See How Do I? Decluttering tips for pest deterrents

☐ **Keep rotation system**

- ☐ First in, first out: eat older items first
- ☐ Check dates regularly
- ☐ Don't stockpile more than you can eat
- ☐ Toss expired items

☐ **If you have a mini-fridge in your room**

- ☐ Keep it at 40°F or below
- ☐ Don't overfill; air needs to circulate
- ☐ Clean up spills immediately so they don't get sticky or attract pests
- ☐ Check contents weekly for expired or bad items
- ☐ Don't store raw meat unless you'll use it immediately

Safe Food Handling

☐ **Wash your hands before handling food**

- Use soap and water for 20 seconds
- If you don't have access to a working sink, use hand sanitizer
- Especially important before eating so you stay healthy

☐ **Use clean surfaces and utensils**

- Wipe down surfaces before preparing food
- Use clean plates, cups, and utensils
- Don't use the same utensil for raw and cooked food

☐ **Reheat leftovers properly**

- Heat until steaming hot (165°F)
- Stir and heat again to ensure even temperature
- Don't reheat food that's been refrigerated more than once

☐ **Don't cross-contaminate**

- Keep raw meat separate from everything
- Use different cutting boards, knives, and utensils for raw meat and vegetables
- Wash your hands with soap after handling raw meat

Emergency Food Resources

If you don't have access to safe food, check into:

☐ **School resources**

- Free and reduced lunch programs
- Breakfast at school
- Weekend backpack programs (some schools send food home)
- Ask your school counselor about food assistance

☐ **Community resources**

- Local food banks
- Churches/religious organizations
- Community centers
- Free meal programs

☐ **Government programs**

- SNAP (food stamps)
- WIC (if applicable)
- Summer lunch programs for kids

Talk to your school counselor—they know what's available in your area and can connect you confidentially.

Warning Signs of Food Poisoning

If you eat something and develop these symptoms, you might have food poisoning:

☐ **Mild (Usually resolves on its own):**

Symptoms:	What to Do:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nausea• Vomiting• Diarrhea• Stomach cramps• Mild fever	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stay hydrated (water, clear fluids)• Rest• Don't eat until you feel better• Gradually reintroduce bland foods (crackers, toast, rice)

☐ **SERIOUS (Get medical help)**

Symptoms:

- High fever (over 101.5 °F)
- Bloody diarrhea or vomit
- Severe dehydration (no urination, extreme thirst, dizziness)
- Symptoms lasting more than 3 days
- Difficulty breathing or swallowing
- Vision problems or muscle weakness

What to Do:

- **Call the school nurse, go to the ER, or call 911 if you have serious symptoms.**

Quick Reference: How Long Food Lasts

Room Temperature

(Unopened, Shelf-Stable):

- Canned goods: 1-5 years (check can condition)
- Dry pasta/rice: 1-2 years
- Cereal: 6-12 months
- Crackers: 6-9 months
- Peanut butter: 6-9 months
- Granola bars: 6-12 months

Refrigerator (40 °F or below):

- Fresh meat: 1-2 days
- Fresh poultry: 1-2 days
- Fresh fish: 1-2 days
- Eggs: 3-5 weeks
- Milk: 7 days after opening
- Leftovers: 3-4 days
- Deli meat: 3-5 days after opening

Freezer (0 °F or below):

- Most foods: 2-6 months (quality degrades but stays safe if frozen solid)
- Bread: 2-3 months

Note: These are guidelines. Always use your senses to verify.

Troubleshooting

“I don’t know how long something has been in the fridge.”

- If you don’t know, assume it’s too old
- Toss it—it’s not worth the risk
- Going forward, label items with dates

“The fridge isn’t working properly but I can’t fix it.”

- Avoid refrigerated foods
- Focus on shelf-stable items
- Eat out or use school meals when possible
- Talk to your school counselor about the situation

“There’s moldy food in the fridge and it’s not mine.”

- You’re not responsible for cleaning the whole fridge
- Focus on keeping YOUR food safe and separate
- Store food in your room if needed
- Don’t eat anything questionable

“I’m really hungry but I’m not sure if the food is safe.”

- If you’re truly unsure, don’t risk it
- Look for sealed, shelf-stable options
- Ask the school nurse or counselor about emergency food resources
- Call a trusted adult who can help

“My family won’t throw away bad food.”

- You can’t control what they eat
- Focus on YOUR food safety
- Keep your food separate and clearly labeled
- Toss things that are clearly unsafe if you can do so without conflict

Accessibility Considerations

Food safety can be more challenging with certain disabilities or limitations. If you have limited sense of smell, rely more heavily on dates and visual inspection. If you have limited vision, use tactile cues (sliminess, texture changes) and dates (use magnifier or ask for help reading). If executive function makes tracking dates difficult, use a simple system like writing the week you opened something on the package. If you can’t prepare food safely due to physical limitations, focus on pre-made items that require minimal handling. If you don’t have access to proper storage, do the best you can with what’s available and reach out to resources for help.

Important Reminders

- **Food poisoning is serious.** When in doubt, throw it out.
- **Trust your senses.** If it smells or looks bad, it probably is.
- **You deserve safe food.** Don’t eat questionable food because you’re hungry—find resources.
- **It’s okay to throw away food.** Your health is more important than waste.
- **Ask for help if you need it.** Food insecurity is real and resources exist.

Real Talk

Food safety probably isn't something you've thought much about—most people don't until they get food poisoning.

But when you're living in a hoarded home where the fridge might not work right, where moldy food sits next to fresh food, where you don't know how long something's been there—**food safety becomes survival knowledge.**

Getting sick from bad food isn't just unpleasant. It can make you miss school, screw up your plans, and make an already hard situation worse.

You deserve to eat healthy food that won't make you sick.

If that means keeping granola bars in your room instead of risking the kitchen. If that means eating breakfast at school because you can't trust what's at home. If that means throwing away food that your family insists is "fine."

Trust your gut. Protect yourself.

Food shouldn't be a source of stress or illness on top of everything else you're dealing with.

Check dates. Trust your nose. Store things properly. Ask for help when you need it.

Take care of yourself. You're worth it.