

SAFE FOOD HANDLING AND STORAGE IN FOOD PANTRIES



Food pantries play a vital role in supplementing the diets of individuals and families in the communities they serve. To ensure that all pantry clientele, especially those that may be at a higher risk for contracting foodborne illness, receive safe food, pantries must follow proper food handling and storage practices.

HOW TO ACCEPT SAFE FOODS

Food pantries often receive food from multiple sources. Food should always be procured from reputable sources and carefully inspected for safety and quality before being accepted by a food pantry. Contaminated or spoiled food can pose a risk to pantry staff and clientele.

Pantries should NOT accept items with any of the following problems:

- Items not in their original, sealed packaging.
- Items with tears, holes, dents or punctures in the packaging.
- Items with leaks, dampness, mold or water stains.
- Cans that have rust, dents or bulging or swollen lids.
- Bottles or jars with popped safety seals or that have been opened.
- Items that are visibly rotten or spoiled.
- Items with abnormal color or unpleasant odors.
- Items with signs of pest damage or infestation.
- Items without or that have passed the manufacturer's "Use By" or expiration dates.
- Items that have not been stored or transported at the appropriate temperature.*
- Items that are home-canned or prepared by an unlicensed food processor.

***Use a tip-sensitive thermometer to check that refrigerated and frozen items are at the correct temperature (refrigerated items should be 41 degrees Fahrenheit or below and frozen items should be 0 degrees Fahrenheit or below). If you do not have the capacity to use a thermometer, visually inspect frozen items for signs of thawing or refreezing, such as wet packaging, large ice crystals on the product, or frozen liquid at the bottom of the package.**

Promptly discard all food that is potentially unsafe for clients.

**WHEN IN DOUBT,
THROW IT OUT!**



Food Product Dating

Food manufacturers use different types of product dating to help consumers and retailers decide if food is of the best quality. With the exception of infant formula, these dates are not an indicator of product safety and are not required by federal law.

Types of dates on food packaging:

- **“Sell By”** date indicates how long retail stores should display a food. It is not a safety date.
- **“Best if Used By”** or **“Best if Used Before”** date indicates when to consume a food at its peak flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- **“Use By”** date is the manufacturer’s recommendation for when to consume a product at its peak quality. It is not a safety date except when used for infant formula. **Infant formula past its “Use By” date should never be accepted or distributed by a food pantry.**
- **“Freeze By”** date indicates when a product should be frozen to maintain quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- **“Closed Dates”** or **“Coded Dates”** are manufacturer’s packing numbers.

A food’s shelf life depends on many factors, such as they type of food, packaging, and the time, temperature, and humidity at which it is stored. Consider these factors when determining the quality and safety of the food in your pantry.

HOW TO SAFELY HANDLE FOOD

To reduce the risk of food contamination and to keep pantry staff and clientele safe, follow good personal hygiene practices when handling food in a food pantry. This includes:

- Hand-washing.
- Managing fingernails and wounds or cuts.
- Using hair restraints and single-use gloves as needed.
- Maintaining personal cleanliness.
- Wearing appropriate clothing.
- Refraining from eating, drinking, smoking or chewing gum or tobacco.
- Notifying pantry staff when you are sick to determine if it is safe for you to handle food or work in the pantry.



HOW TO SAFELY STORE FOOD

Properly storing foods preserves food quality and prevents spoilage and foodborne illness. Follow the guidelines below when storing food in a food pantry.

General food storage

- Store food in a clean, dry place away from dust and dirt.
- Store food in designated storage areas. Always store nonfood items and chemicals away from food.
- Food must be stored away from walls and ceilings and at least 6 inches off the floor.
- Use the first-in, first-out (FIFO) method to make sure food is used by its expiration date. Store items with the earliest “Use By” or expiration dates in front of items with later dates. Always use items stored in the front first.
- Carefully monitor the pantry’s inventory. If any items become visibly rotten or spoiled, discard them. Check any items stored near the rotten or spoiled items and clean and sanitize the area promptly.
- Always store food at the correct temperature.*
- To prevent cross-contamination, separate raw meat, poultry and seafood from unwashed and ready-to-eat fruits and vegetables during storage.

***Follow all recommended storage temperatures and times to maintain food quality and safety. For detailed storage guidance for specific food items, visit the [Nutrition.gov Safe Food Storage page \(http://bit.ly/3cV8PH1\)](http://bit.ly/3cV8PH1).**

Cold storage

- Foods that require refrigeration or freezing should be placed in a cooler or freezer promptly once it has arrived at the pantry.
- Refrigerated items should be kept at 41 degrees Fahrenheit or below. Frozen items should be kept at 0 degrees Fahrenheit or below.
- All cooler and freezer units should have an air-temperature measuring device, such as a hanging thermometer, to monitor temperatures regularly. Designate a person to maintain a log of recorded cooler and freezer temperatures.
- Keep cooler and freezer doors shut as much as possible to reduce temperature fluctuation.
- Do not overload coolers or freezers; this prevents airflow and makes it harder for units to stay cold.
- Do not line cooler or freezer shelves with materials that may restrict airflow, such as aluminum foil or paper.
- Defrost freezers regularly to prevent frost buildup and keep them working efficiently.



A pantry's capacity will determine how refrigerated foods should be separated.

- If a pantry has sufficient space and equipment, raw meat, poultry and seafood should be stored in a separate cooler unit from ready-to-eat fruits and vegetables. This is the ideal way to prevent cross-contamination.
- If a pantry has only one cooler unit, raw meat, poultry and seafood and ready-to-eat fresh fruits and vegetables should be stored on separate shelves. The diagram below shows the correct order for storing these items.*
- If coolers do not have adequate shelving capacity to store all of these items on separate shelves, ensure that raw meat, poultry and seafood items are stored in separate containers, sealed plastic bags or plastic wrap to prevent their juices from dripping onto other foods. These items should then be placed in the cooler following the order below. *NOTE* While this method can help to prevent cross-contamination in pantries with limited storage capacity, temperature fluctuations in the cooler and handling of foods when putting them in/taking them out make this method difficult to control for food safety.

*To prevent cross-contamination of refrigerated items, store the items in the following order:



NOTE In a freezer, raw meat, poultry and seafood can be stored with or above ready-to-eat foods if all of the items have been commercially processed and packaged.

Dry storage

- The optimum storage temperature for dry foods is 50 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit (dry foods should always be stored below 85 degrees Fahrenheit). Keep a thermometer in dry-storage areas to monitor temperatures regularly. Designate a person to maintain a log of recorded temperatures.
- Keep storage areas dry and free of excessive moisture.
- Dry storage areas should include easy-to-clean equipment that permits good air circulation.
- Storage equipment should be made of corrosion-resistant metal or food-grade plastic.
- Any doors leading to the pantry building's exterior should be self-closing.



MAINTAINING A CLEAN AND SAFE FOOD PANTRY

Regular cleaning and maintenance are an important part of maintaining a clean and safe food pantry. Pantries should also consider adopting policies and procedures to further promote the safe acceptance, storage and distribution of food.

Facility cleaning and maintenance

- Any equipment that will come in contact with food should be smooth, nonabsorbent and easy to clean.
- Check all equipment regularly to make sure it is working properly.
- Organize the pantry in such a way that all equipment is accessible for regular cleaning.
 - Regularly clean the floors, walls and shelving in refrigerators, freezers and dry-storage areas.
 - Regularly clean equipment used to transport food, such as carts and dollies.
 - Create a master cleaning schedule that includes what, when and how all items should be cleaned.
- Maintain adequate plumbing, lighting and ventilation.
- Carefully maintain all utilities, including water, electricity, gas, sewage and garbage disposal.
- Store waste or recyclables separately from food or food-contact surfaces. Garbage containers must be leakproof, waterproof, and pest-proof, and easy to clean. Clean garbage containers regularly.
- Dispose of garbage promptly.
- Clean up any spills and leaks promptly to prevent contamination.
- Control pests. Food pantries should be professionally serviced regularly to prevent and treat pest-control problems. Doors, windows, vents, floors and walls, along with external walls and roofs, should be adequately maintained to protect against pests.



Adopting a food safety policy

A food safety policy is a statement of the pantry's commitment to safe and quality food procurement and distribution. Consider adopting a food pantry food safety policy to help guide pantry staff and volunteers' decision-making and ensure that foods your pantry is accepting, storing and distributing meet designated safety and quality standards. Having a written food safety policy can also help you to further communicate these standards to pantry clientele and donors.

For additional information and resources for developing a food safety policy, check out the [Safe and Healthy Food Pantries Project implementation tools \(http://bit.ly/31a9LS4\)](http://bit.ly/31a9LS4).

Food safety training

Food pantry staff and volunteers should be trained to follow all food safety policies and procedures. Maintain an up-to-date training log for all pantry staff and volunteers. Notify staff and volunteers of any changes to food pantry policies and procedures.

References

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Authors:

Makenzie Miller, M.S., Assistant Extension Agent, School of Nutrition and Food Sciences
Wenquig Xu, Ph.D., Consumer Food Safety Specialist and Assistant Professor, School of Nutrition and Food Sciences
Under the direction of Denise Holston, Ph.D., RDN, LDN, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention High Obesity Program Project Director and Assistant Professor, School of Nutrition and Food Sciences.

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William B. Richardson, LSU Vice President for Agriculture
Louisiana State University Agricultural Center, Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station, Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, LSU College of Agriculture
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