

Do Your Part to Prevent Food Loss



Food loss can be draining on your time and money, but there are many ways you can preserve perishable foods and prevent waste.

MANHATTAN, Kan. – You go to the grocery store and buy several items to make meals for the week in your home. Your week gets hectic, and you don't have time to cook the meals you had planned. Unfortunately, the foods you bought are now either past their peak quality or are obviously spoiled.

Food loss not only spoils your budget, but it also poses a hindrance on your time, said Mary Meck Higgins, associate professor and extension specialist in the Department of Human Nutrition at Kansas State University. She said when food goes bad, consumers have to spend the time to go to the store to buy more food, bring it home, put it away, prepare it and take out the trash. This adds up to be more costly in time and money than it otherwise would have been if the consumers hadn't wasted what they bought the first time.

Making people aware of avoidable food loss and how to prevent it is a goal of World Food Day, a global movement to end hunger that is celebrated Oct. 16. It is a day to remember the estimated nearly 870 million of the 7 billion people in the world, or one in eight, who suffer from chronic malnourishment, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which established World Food Day. While most malnourished people are from developing countries, more than 49 million people in the United States alone struggle with hunger or food insecurity, and most of them are children.

Higgins, who is also a registered dietitian, said that more than one-third of the food produced in the United States is wasted, and on average, U.S. households throw away 14 percent of food purchases. If a person didn't waste food, she said, it would be like eating for free for 51 days, or a little more than seven weeks.

"Realizing that you can get 51 days of free meals makes a little bit of planning worth it," Higgins said. "It makes a big difference not only in your time and your budget on the personal level, but it makes such a big difference in terms of our natural resources."

On the environmental level, Higgins said avoidable food loss is comparable to leaving the faucet running, since it is responsible for the loss of about 25 percent of all freshwater consumption. Wasted food ends up as solid waste in landfills, and as it decomposes, it produces methane that warms the climate.

Higgins said the foods most likely to be wasted are fresh fruits and vegetables, beverages, bread and bakery products, dairy products, eggs, meat and fish. Consumers can follow many tips to prevent food loss:

Make smart buying decisions.

- Buy what you need, and make the most of your food dollars. If you can't use something before it goes bad, don't buy it.
- Buy only the amount of food you will use before it spoils or by its "best used by" date.

- Buy more non-perishable foods, such as canned, frozen and dried foods. Select those with distant “best used by” dates.

- Select produce items that are slightly firm and free of bruises and decay.

- Buy fresh fruits and vegetables that don’t keep well in small amounts each time, and more frequently.

Use what you have at home.

- Eat the food you have at home in a timely fashion, rather than buying new food for your meals.

- Refrigerate leftover perishable foods within two hours, and make a plan to use the leftovers promptly, usually within three days or less, or freeze them.

- Pack leftovers into reusable containers, chill and eat them for lunch the next day at work or school.

- Use leftovers from one meal in a different recipe the next day for a second meal.

- Place the food you need to eat first in the most readily accessible positions in your refrigerator.

- When life gets busier than you had planned, and you don’t have time to prepare what you have bought, freeze foods in a timely way for future meals. For example, preserve fresh fish, poultry, stew meats and ground meats by freezing them within two days. Cook or freeze cuts of red meats within three to five days. You also can freeze extra portions of cooked dry beans after a meal, and excess amounts of milk or fresh bread before they go sour or mold.

- Cook at home often instead of constantly dining out or ordering take-out food, because restaurants create a lot of food waste. Be sure to reduce at-home plate waste by serving appropriately sized portions.

- If you won’t use an unspoiled food before its “best used by” date, donate it to your local food pantry or soup kitchen.

Prevent produce waste.

- Instead of peeling fruits and vegetables that have edible skins, such as potatoes and apples, scrub them to get rid of any dirt and eat them with the skins. This not only gives you health benefits from eating the extra nutrients in the skins, but it will minimize food waste going into the landfill. You also can use them to make soup stock.

- Serve “fragile” fresh fruits and vegetables within a few days of buying them for a snack, in a salad or as dessert. For example, if you buy a carton of berries, eat them fresh the first day or two and freeze the rest for future use in a smoothie.

- Allow produce you have washed to dry well before storing it. Excess moisture can lead to mold or rot, and mold spreads quickly. If you spot a few spoiled foods in the bunch, discard the bad ones immediately. Store berries, mushrooms and fresh herbs unwashed in moisture-proof containers and between paper towels to absorb extra water, and be sure to wash them just before serving.

- Whole and uncut produce stays fresh longer. When any part of the plant food is cut or bruised, cells are broken and spoilage germs start growing. Store all cut produce in the refrigerator.

- Don’t store all produce the same way. Store bananas, oranges, melons, tomatoes, white and sweet potatoes, onions, garlic and winter squash at room temperature, not in the refrigerator. Some fruits, such as apples, bananas and pears, produce ethylene, a

gas that speeds up the ripening process. Avoid storing those items with ones that are sensitive to the gas, such as leafy greens, celery and carrots.

Higgins said avoidable food loss is the issue, and although consumers should work to prevent food loss as much as possible, it is better to throw away foods that have gone bad.

“Perishable leftovers that are no longer safe to eat should be tossed into the garbage,” Higgins said. “For you to risk getting sick is not worth it.”

You can compost plant food scraps, Higgins said, to convert them into soil amendments that will help your garden or yard. Especially if you already compost yard waste, you can put your plant-based food scraps with it.

Established by the FAO in 1979, World Food Day was first observed in 1981. The 2013 theme is “Sustainable Food Systems for Food Security and Nutrition.” World Food Day offers the opportunity to strengthen national and international solidarity in the struggle against hunger, malnutrition and poverty and draw attention to achievements in food security and agricultural development. To learn more, visit www.worldfooddayusa.org.

To learn more about sustainable diets, visit your local K-State Research and Extension office or online at <http://www.ksre.k-state.edu/humannutrition/nutrition-topics/sustainable.html>

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