

Food Waste: Be part of the solution



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Have you ever made the resolution to eat healthier? You fill the kitchen with fresh fruits and vegetables and whip up a couple of stir-fry dishes and fancy salads. But then life gets busy and by the end of the week, you find yourself with a vegetable drawer full of wilting produce that will likely end up in a landfill. You are not alone. The average American discards about 20 pounds of food each month. This food waste has an impact on the environment as well as your grocery bill and your nutrient intake.

The Scope of Food Waste

Food waste is an American and a global problem. Up to 40% of food in the US and a third of food produced around the world is never eaten.[1] When food is wasted, the land, water, energy, and labor used to produce it and get it to our homes is also wasted. The food we discard makes up the largest component of solid waste in landfills in the US. As this waste decomposes, it generates methane, a potent greenhouse gas; food waste is responsible for 58% of landfill emissions.[2] Food waste also contributes to air pollution, water scarcity, biodiversity loss, and soil and water degradation.[3] The food we waste at

home and in retail establishments along with what is lost on the farm or during storage or transport, accounts for about 7% of global greenhouse gas emissions.[4] Nearly 30% of agricultural land is used to produce food that is never consumed. This wasted food could feed 2 billion people, more than double the number of undernourished people around the world.[5]

In the United States, food is wasted at all stages of production, from how it is grown, packaged, and transported to what is discarded in grocery stores and restaurants. Surprisingly though, individual consumers are the largest single source of wasted food.[2] Food waste costs an average American family of four about \$1500 per year. There is also a nutritional cost to this waste. One study found that 66% of the food wasted in homes consisted of fruits and vegetables. These losses accounted for only 29% of calories, but 62% of the fiber, 37% of the calcium, 96% of the vitamin C, and 85% of the vitamin A that was purchased.[6] Simple steps such as buying only what you will use, storing food properly, understanding “use-by” and “sell-by” dates on food labels, freezing or repurposing leftovers, and composting anything that can’t be eaten can reduce your food budget and your environmental impact while increasing your nutrient intake.

Buy Only What You Will Use and Use What You Buy

The first step in avoiding waste is to plan your meals so you don’t buy more than you need. To do this, review your schedule for the week and decide on recipes that you will have time to prepare and eat. Don’t forget to check your kitchen for foods that need to be used up. Then create a shopping list and bring it with you to the store. It can be tricky to buy only what you need. For example, your recipe may call for a few green beans, but the store sells them in one-pound packages. If you buy the package, come up with a way to use the rest before they spoil. Or you may want to choose frozen rather than fresh; they last for months and are often higher in nutrients than fresh, especially if the fresh ones sit in your fridge for a week.[7] Once you get the food home, put away frozen and refrigerated items first. Then follow your meal plan.

Don’t Let the Dates Confuse You

The “use-by”, “sell-by”, and “best if used by” dates on food labels are thought of by consumers as a measure of safety. When a food passes the date on the label, consumers often discard the food. However, with the exception of “use-by”, dates on infant formula, these dates are only suggestions by the manufacturer for when the food is at its peak quality, not when it is unsafe to eat (see Table).[8] Misinterpretation of these dates by consumers and retailers leads them to discard perfectly safe food and is a major cause of

unnecessary food waste.[9] Foods not exhibiting signs of spoilage may be sold, purchased, donated, and consumed beyond the labeled "best if used by" or "use-by" date. [10].

What do Food Dates Mean?	
Best if Used By/Before	The date the product will be of best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
Sell-By	The date a store can display the product for sale for inventory management. It is not a safety date.
Use-By	The last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date except for when used on infant formula.
Freeze-By	The date a product should be frozen to maintain peak quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

Use or Freeze Food that is Losing its Freshness

Planning and shopping from a list are important but keeping track of what you already have is key in limiting waste. Eat the most perishable foods first - raspberries don't last as long as oranges. Check your refrigerator throughout the week to see what you need to use up. Is there half of casserole that you didn't eat earlier in the week? Make a plan to use or freeze what's left. Find ways to use foods that are aging. Leftover meats and veggies can be turned into taco bowls and stir fries. Softening fruit, such as apples or blueberries, can be baked into muffins or added to cooked oatmeal. Aging bananas can be blended into smoothies or frozen to be used in baking at a later date. Slightly wilted vegetables can be added to smoothies or cooked in soups and casseroles and then these soups and casseroles can be frozen for future meals.

Compost What You Can't Save.

No matter how diligent you are at planning, freezing, and repurposing the food in your fridge, some things can't be saved. But that doesn't mean you have to throw them in the trash. If you have a yard, you can set up a compost heap or bin in which to toss food that has spoiled as well as peels and cores. When food waste is composted, it is broken down in the presence of oxygen. This generates some carbon dioxide, but not methane, which is a far more potent greenhouse gas. If you don't have a yard there are ways of composting inside.[10] Many communities also offer communal compost heaps, and more and more

communities and private companies are offering curbside compost pickup. So, if you are not inclined or able to compost yourself see what options are available in your area.

Conclusion

Don't give up on the resolution to eat healthier. All the suggestions for reducing food waste, from planning meals to repurposing leftovers and freezing extras can help you to eat the nutritious foods you purchased and improve your diet while saving your food budget and reducing your environmental impact. Next time your vegetable drawer is overflowing, instead of tossing it, freeze it, bake it, stir fry it, or blend it into something delicious.

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