

Natural Resources Defense Council

# Read This Before Cleaning Out Your Fridge

Debunking five popular myths that lead us to needlessly throw out meals—and money.

June 27, 2016 Ramona Emerson



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There's something rotten in the state of food, and it's probably not that carton of milk you just threw away. Each year, 2.9 trillion pounds of food—one-third of what the world produces—is wasted. In the United States alone, this amounted to 133 billion pounds of edibles going uneaten. Oh, and the oil required to grow all that food? More than 70 times what was spilled in the Gulf of Mexico in the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

Some of this loss happens at the distribution and commercial level; farmers are regularly forced to trash tons (literally) of “ugly” produce that doesn't meet supermarkets' standards of aesthetic perfection. But here's where there's hope: Because about 44 percent of post-farm food waste happens in people's homes, a little effort on our part can have a big impact. The first step is erasing common misconceptions about what's good, bad, and yes, sometimes even ugly, in our fridges and pantries.

## Myth: You get food poisoning from eating old food.

Food-related illnesses can almost always be tracked back to *E. coli*, salmonella, listeria, or other pernicious microbes. These are totally different from the generally harmless microbes that make our foods fade and eventually rot. “You could drink a glass of spoiled milk and you might get a stomachache because it tastes bad, but you're not going to get food poisoning,” says Dana Gunders, a senior scientist in NRDC's Food and Agriculture program. Don't force yourself to drink it, or course, but that slightly chunky milk is great for pancakes. And if milk is past its date but still smells and tastes perfectly fine, then it is perfectly fine to drink.

## Myth: Discolored or wilted greens are beyond saving.

You know how leaves turn colors in the fall? The same process is at work when your arugula starts going yellow a week after you get it home from the market. The pigments that give plants their green color are

chlorophyll and carotene, and chlorophyll isn't very stable. As soon as a plant is cut, it starts to break down and lose its color. That leaves only carotene, which on its own makes the plant appear yellow. This is a natural aging process and not a food-safety concern, so just cut the yellow part off. Limpness is also a natural by-product of a plant's aging, so if your greens are looking a little sad, soak them in ice water for five to ten minutes. Thanks to osmosis, water will flow into the leaf and perk it right up.

### Myth: Crisper drawers are a marketing ploy.

Actually, where you put things in your refrigerator matters. Heat rises, so generally the coldest area is at the bottom and the warmest areas are the top shelf and the door. Put low-risk items like yogurt, cooked leftovers, and drinks on the top level and items that carry a higher risk of food-borne illness like uncooked meat and fish on the bottom. Nothing but condiments should be kept in the door. Crisper drawers are for produce that require an environment that's more moist than the normal refrigerator air. Use one drawer for leafy greens that need high humidity. (That added moisture will keep them fresh and green longer.) In the other drawer, store fruit, mushrooms, and peppers. If possible, keep it cracked slightly to allow ethylene gas, which is released by fruit and speeds the ripening process, to escape.

### Myth: Pretty produce is better than ugly produce.

Shocking amounts of perfectly delicious produce get thrown away every year because of totally benign physical shortcomings, like a carrot with an extra stalk or an apple that isn't quite "apple-shaped." In fact, fruits and vegetables get trashed more than any other kind of food. Scars (brown lines or indentations, which develop during growth) and scabs (round, rough patches on apples and pears) have absolutely no effect on taste. Bruises are areas of increased enzyme activity usually brought on by injury and are normally safe to eat, although they can affect the taste or texture of the fruit. "Cut out the bruise, but don't throw out the whole product," Gunders says.

### Myth: "Sell by" dates tell you when a food will start to go bad.

Besides being somewhat arbitrary (there's no federal regulation for those date stamps), "sell by," "use before," and "best by" dates are simply guidelines for freshness and have almost nothing to do with when a food is no longer safe to eat. Eggs, for example, are still good three to five *weeks* after their "sell by" date. "Eggs and dairy are the most common products that people unnecessarily throw out because they're misinterpreting the date on the packaging," Gunders says. The "sell by" dates you should pay close attention to are those on deli meats, unpasteurized cheese, and hot dogs and sausages that aren't fully cooked. These have a higher likelihood of carrying the pathogen listeria, which is unique in that it can grow under refrigeration. Otherwise, use your common sense, not the date on the label, to decide if something can be eaten. "If a product past its 'sell by' date looks and smells okay, then it probably is," Gunders says.