



Make food donations count

I helped during a recent food drive, and I saw some of the donated items were past their expiration date. Is that OK? Are they safe?

They may or may not be safe, but it depends on the food bank on whether they accept food items with expired dates. It's always best to check with the organization for its guidelines.

One of the challenges is that dates on food items often aren't true expiration dates, at least in regards to food safety. Although there are no federal standards for these terms:

- "Sell by" indicates how long the manufacturer recommends that the product be displayed for sale at retail. This does not include any time that the product might be in your home.

- "Best by" or "use by" indicates when the product should be consumed for best flavor or quality.

Last fall, the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic and the Natural Resources Defense Council issued a comprehensive, 64-page report on how a lack of standardization on food label dates — and the confusion that results — contributes to the waste of 160 billion pounds of food each year in the U.S. (See the report at <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/foodpolicyinitiative/files/2013/09/dating-game-report.pdf>). The authors did the math, and said redistributing (instead of pitching) just 30 percent of the food that's wasted in America every year could completely eliminate U.S. food insecurity.

Still, food pantries must ensure that the food they distribute is safe to consume. Many of their clients include the elderly, young children, pregnant women or those battling a chronic illness — the very populations who are most at-risk from food-borne illness. It's smart for a food pantry to be extra cautious about foods past their prime.

If you're making donations during a food drive, find out what the organization is in most need of. Different food pantries target different populations, so their needs could vary. Commonly requested items include:

- Chili with beans.
- Canned fruit (in their own juice or light syrup) and canned vegetables.
- Canned tuna, chicken or other meats.
- Soup (with vegetables).
- Peanut butter.
- Toiletries.

Be careful when donating foods in glass containers, as they might break before they get to the pantry.

Also, consider donating cash. Through agreements with retailers and wholesalers, a food bank can purchase items much more cheaply than consumers can, so a monetary donation is likely to have a bigger impact than a large box of food items.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1043, or filipic.3@osu.edu.



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