



## Questions and Answers About

# Storing Canned and Packaged Food

A food safety study was conducted with 58 international students from 30 different countries at North Dakota State University. Participants indicated the kind of food safety information they would like to get to help them safely handle new and unfamiliar foods they encountered in the U.S. Many of the participants asked for information about food storage, preserving leftovers, proper handling of salads and fresh vegetables, and the safety of processed and frozen foods.

*“What does ‘best before’ mean? Is it still fine to consume after this date?”*

**Q:** Should I check the date before buying canned and packaged foods?

Yes. To enjoy high-quality, safe food, check the date on the packaging at the grocery store. Always write the date of purchase on the packages when you return home from the grocery store, and arrange your cupboards in a “first in, first out” order. Use the “oldest” food first.

**Q:** What does “Sell by” mean?

A sell-by date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date stamped on the container.

**Q:** What does “Best if used by” or “Best if used before” mean?

A “Best if used by (or before)” date tells you how long the product will retain its best flavor or quality. It is not a safety date.

Foods can develop an off odor, flavor or appearance due to spoilage bacteria. If a food has developed such characteristics, you should not use it for quality reasons. If foods are mishandled, foodborne bacteria can grow and cause foodborne illness before or after the date on the package.

**Q:** What does “Use by” mean?

A “Use by” date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. The date has been determined by the manufacturer of the product. Carefully follow the handling and preparation instructions on the food product labels to ensure top quality and safety.

**Q:** What types of canned and boxed products should I avoid buying because of safety reasons?

- Don't buy or use food from containers or cans with sharp dents (especially in the seam of the can) or in cans that are leaking or bulging.
- Don't buy food in cracked glass jars or jars with loose or bulging lids.
- Don't buy food with torn packaging.
- Don't buy canned food with a foul odor or any container that spurts liquid when opening.
- Be sure tamper-resistant safety seals are intact. Be sure safety buttons on metal lids are down and do not move or make a clicking noise when pushed.

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## Q: How and where do I store canned foods, boxed foods and other shelf products?

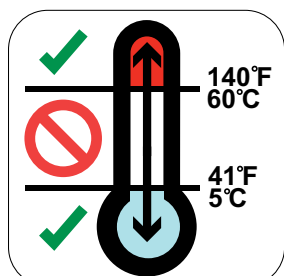
Store canned foods and other dry foods or shelf products in a cool, dry place. Don't put them above the stove, under the sink or in any place exposed to high or low temperature extremes.

## Q: How long can I store canned and boxed foods?

These are some examples of recommended storage times:

- Home-canned food: one year from date of canning
- High-acid canned foods such as tomatoes and other fruit: up to 18 months
- Low-acid foods such as canned meat and vegetables: two to five years
- Cereals and cook-before-eating items such as oatmeal: six to 12 months unopened and three months after opening
- Baking ingredients such as baking powder: six months (unopened) and three months after opening
- Cakes, brownies and bread mixes, 12 to 18 months unopened

## Q: How long can canned food be stored at room temperature after opening?



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Follow the two-hour rule: If perishable food has been left in the *danger zone* (between 40 degrees Fahrenheit, or 5 Celsius, and 140 F, or 70 C) for more than two hours, discard it even though it may look and smell OK.

## Q: Can you store food in an open can?

For best quality, remove the food from the can and put it into another covered container before refrigerating or freezing.



For more information, visit these Web sites:

NDSU Extension Service:  
[www.ndsu.edu/globalfood](http://www.ndsu.edu/globalfood)  
(information about food safety and nutrition in several languages)

[www.ndsu.edu/eatsmart](http://www.ndsu.edu/eatsmart)  
(click on “publications” at the bottom, then “food safety”)

Partnership for Food Safety Education:  
[www.fightbac.org](http://www.fightbac.org)

Food and Drug Administration:  
[www.cfsan.fda.gov](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov)

U.S. Department of Agriculture:  
[www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact\\_Sheets/index.asp](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/index.asp)

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