

YOUR GUIDE TO FOOD PANTRIES

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps you have used a food pantry in the past to help feed your family. Or, perhaps you are considering going to a food pantry for the first time. Either way, this booklet has been designed to help you.

In this booklet, you will find:

- Helpful hints for using food pantries.
- Myths and facts about food pantries.
- Information on expiration dates and how to better understand them.
- Steps to safely transport, handle and store your foods.
- Tips for stretching your food dollars.
- Ideas for meal planning and preparation.

Before you head out to a food pantry, we encourage you to take some time to read over the information in this booklet. If you have any questions, consider reaching out to your local UT Extension agent. Your local UT Extension agent is a trusted source of nonbiased information on food, nutrition and budgeting. They can provide you with information that you might find helpful as you feed your family.



HELPFUL HINTS FOR USING FOOD PANTRIES

What is a food pantry?

A food pantry is an individual site that distributes food directly to those who are in need and often reside in a particular area. Food pantries are typically run by non-profit organizations and staffed by volunteers. These organizations can include houses of worship, community centers and schools. Some areas may even have mobile pantries. Mobile pantries deliver food to a specific site for distribution.

How do food pantries work?

Unlike traditional grocery stores, food pantries offer food at no cost to you. Foods are purchased for or donated to food pantries. For this reason, selections may be limited. However, many pantries offer items that can easily help you meet the nutritional needs of your family.

What foods can I get at a food pantry?

The types of foods available at a food pantry will differ depending on the pantry, its location, and the donations the pantry has received. When shopping the pantry, it is a good idea to select foods that you know you will not be able to buy with other benefits such as WIC. Additionally, you may wish to use the pantry to extend the supply of your family's favorite foods or those foods that seem to be eaten frequently and quickly in your household.

When are food pantries open?

The hours of operation for food pantries vary by location. Some pantries keep regular hours throughout the week while other pantries may only be open on

certain days or at certain times. To find out the hours of operation, it is best to call the food pantry before you make a trip. Even if you find the hours of operation for a food pantry on the web, it is still a good idea to call to confirm.

How is food given out at a food pantry? Can I pick my own food?

How you get your food will vary by location. Some pantries offer a box or bags of food for each family. The contents are often determined by the food on hand. If someone in your family has a special dietary need, such as a food allergy, talk to someone at your pantry before you go. It also will be important that you read the ingredient labels carefully.

Some food pantries distribute food through what is called a "client choice style." In this case, you are able to choose foods much like you would in a regular grocery store. This style allows you greater flexibility to pick out the food items your family needs.

If you have any questions or concerns, you can always talk with the food pantry staff. They can help you better understand how food is distributed.

Why does the food pantry always seem so rushed and busy?

Keep in mind that your pantry may be serving many families. Because they are often staffed with volunteers, they may not have enough staff. If pantry hours are flexible, check with staff to find out what times the pantry is less crowded. Also, if you would like to give back to your community, ask if you could volunteer.

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT FOOD PANTRIES

You may have heard things about food pantries that discourage you from going. The following information can help you separate the facts from misinformation.

Myth #1: *You must be homeless to qualify for food pantry services.*

Fact: You do not have to be homeless to use food pantry services. In fact, many of the people who visit food pantries are not.

Myth #2: *You have to be unemployed or your children must be receiving free or reduced lunch to be eligible for pantry services.*

Fact: Pantries can set their own eligibility guidelines. At some pantries, you may be asked to provide a form of identification and/or proof of your address, or you may be asked how many people live with you. We advise calling ahead to ask a pantry about any eligibility or documentation requirements they might have.

Myth #3: *You can only visit one pantry each month.*

Fact: While some pantries restrict visits due to the volume of clientele and availability of food, in many cases you are able and welcome to visit multiple pantries to ensure your needs are met during the month. Check with your local pantries to see how many visits you can make.

Myth #4: *The food pantry only provides a prepackaged box of canned goods.*

Fact: What a pantry distributes depends on many factors including what food

items they have on hand at a specific time. Some pantries provide perishable and nonperishable foods. Foods you might find include: dairy products, fresh fruits and vegetables, baked goods, canned goods, dried goods, frozen meats, and more.

Myth #5: *Food pantries receive funding and food from the government.*

Fact: The food at food pantries usually comes from a variety of sources. Some pantries rely on donations from community members or members of their faith community. Other pantries may receive food from a food bank. Additionally, some pantries participate in the USDA commodities program.

Myth #6: *Food pantries only provide food.*

Fact: While some pantries only provide food (often due to the size of their space and staff), many agencies provide a variety of non-food options, such as personal care items, paper products or other supplies. Some even provide help beyond food, such as job training, employment services, or help applying for benefits. Again, what is provided will vary from pantry to pantry. Check with your local pantries to find out more.

Myths and Facts adapted from North Illinois Food Bank. (2019). Visiting a food pantry Myths and facts. Used with permission.





DATES ON FOOD PACKAGES – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Are you concerned about the dates on food packages you receive from a pantry? If you receive a food with a date that has passed, is it still safe to eat? The following information can help you avoid throwing away food when it is still safe to eat.

Manufacturers use two types of dates on packaged foods. One is a calendar date that is applied to the product by the manufacturer or retailer. The other is a series of letters and/or numbers applied by the manufacturer that describes when the product was manufactured.

The calendar date gives you an estimated time when the product is at its best quality. It also tells the retailer how long to stock the food. The manufacturer determines these dates. They are not required by the Food and Drug Administration. The following are some types of calendar dates you will typically see on food packages:

- “Sell by” date is for the store and tells them to sell the product by that date.

- “Best if used by (or before)” date tells you the date to eat the food by for best quality.
- “Use by” date is the latest date on which you should eat the food item for best quality.

It is important to remember that these dates are used to estimate the quality of the product and do not indicate that a food is unsafe. Do not think you need to throw away a package of food because it is past the date on the package.

One exception to this rule is infant formula. Federal regulations require dates on infant formula. ***Do not buy or use infant formula when it is past the “use-by” date.***

Even though the calendar dates on food packages are not meant to determine when a food is no longer safe to eat, always examine food for signs of spoilage, such as mold, a bad odor, or leaking or bulging cans.

TRANSPORTING, HANDLING AND STORING FOODS SAFELY

Transporting

Make the food pantry your last stop before going home. Food left in a hot car for too long can become unsafe. Heat also makes food spoil more quickly, especially perishable foods, such as dairy foods, meat and seafood, and produce. On a hot day when you know you cannot refrigerate perishable foods quickly, take a cooler with ice or ice packs.

Handling

There are four basic practices that will help you protect yourself and your family from getting sick from food.

1. CLEAN

Wash your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds before and after handling food and after using the bathroom, changing diapers and handling pets.

Wash your cutting boards, dishes, utensils and countertops with hot water and soap after preparing each food item and before you go on to the next food.

Use paper towels or clean cloth towels to clean kitchen surfaces.

Rinse fresh fruits and vegetables under running tap water, including those with skins and rinds that are not eaten.

2. SEPARATE

Separate raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs from other foods in your box or bags, and in your refrigerator. Make sure raw meats and juices don't touch ready-to-eat foods.

Use one cutting board for fresh produce and a separate one for raw meat, poultry and seafood.

Never place cooked food on a plate that previously held raw meat, poultry, seafood or eggs.

3. COOK

Use a food thermometer to measure the internal temperature of cooked meat, poultry and egg dishes to make sure that the food is cooked to a safe internal temperature.

Cook roasts and steaks to a minimum of 145 F. All poultry should reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 F. Check the internal temperature in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast with a food thermometer.

Cook ground meat to at least 160 F.

Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm, not runny. Don't use recipes with raw eggs unless the food will be cooked.

Cook fish to 145 F or until the flesh is opaque and separates easily with a fork.

Cover food, stir and rotate for even cooking in the microwave oven. If there is no turntable, rotate the dish by hand once or twice during cooking.

Bring sauces, soups and gravy to a boil when reheating. Heat other leftovers thoroughly to 165 F.

4. CHILL

Set your refrigerator temperature at 40 F or below and your freezer temperature at 0 F or below. Keep an appliance thermometer in your refrigerator and freezer so that you can check the temperature.

Refrigerate or freeze meat, poultry, eggs and other perishables as soon as you get them home.

Never let raw meat, poultry, eggs, cooked food or cut fresh fruits or vegetables sit at room temperature more than two hours before putting them in the refrigerator or freezer (one hour when the temperature is above 90 F).

Defrost food in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave. Do not thaw food at room temperature. Food thawed in cold water or in the microwave should be cooked immediately.

Divide large amounts of leftovers into shallow containers to cool quickly in the refrigerator.

Storing

Foods will be safe and last longer if you store them correctly.

- Store milk and eggs in the coldest part of the refrigerator, not in the door. Milk that has been kept cold will last a few days past the date on the container. Eggs will keep three to five weeks past the date on the carton.
- Ultra-pasteurized milk can be stored in the cupboard for up to 90 days for best quality. Once opened, it should be refrigerated and will keep for seven to 10 days for best quality and taste.
- Freeze bread if you cannot eat it within a few days. Throw it away if you see green or white mold growing.
- Keep cupboard and pantries clean, cool and dry.
- Package foods securely to keep out pests and maintain freshness.
- Discard leftovers after four days or freeze them.
- Clean your refrigerator with soap and water routinely and when there are spills.

TIPS FOR STRETCHING YOUR FOOD DOLLARS

Not all the food for your family will come from a food pantry. The tips below are proven strategies that can help you as you budget for the rest of your family's food needs. You may find these tips useful as you shop for groceries:

- Take advantage of benefits for which you may qualify, such as WIC and SNAP. Use your WIC vouchers for foods that are allowed and your SNAP dollars on foods that cannot be purchased with vouchers.
- Budget your SNAP benefits for the entire month. Figure out how much you can spend by dividing the total amount by the number of times you shop. (See chart on facing page. An example has been included in the last column.)
- Before you shop, check for foods you have on hand. Then, check for advertised sales, specials and coupons for foods your family likes and that you need. Don't buy items just because they are on sale or you have a coupon. Join the store's loyalty program for additional sales.
- Create a grocery list before your trip to the grocery store to help prevent unplanned purchases, as well as to save time.
- Compare prices on canned, frozen and fresh foods. Canned and frozen foods are also healthy and can be stored for weeks.
- Look at unit pricing on shelves to compare prices among brands. Keep in mind that sometimes store brands are cheaper than name brands even when using coupons or sales.
- Shop once a week or less. More frequent shopping trips cost more in both time and money.
- Stretch your dollars with dried beans and peas. Cooking your own beans is much cheaper than using canned beans. A 1-pound package of beans costs about the same as one 15-ounce can of beans, but it yields 5-6 cups of cooked beans, compared to 1 ½ cups per can of beans.
- Don't go food shopping when you are hungry. When you are hungry, you tend to buy food not on your list, and usually it is not healthy.
- Determine how much money you plan to spend. Take only the amount of cash you plan to spend. Use a calculator if you need to keep up with your purchases. Doing this will keep you from spending more money than you planned to spend. It will also help you stick to your budget.

BUDGETING SNAP BENEFITS

		<i>Example</i>
<i>Enter monthly assistance dollar amount.</i>	\$	\$ 248.00
<i>Divide monthly dollar amount by anticipated grocery trips per month.</i>	÷	÷ 4 grocery trips
<i>This is the amount to budget for each grocery trip.</i>	= \$	= \$ 62.00





IDEAS FOR MEAL PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Meal planning and preparation can save you both time and money.

Make a plan. Preparing meals on Sunday for the week ahead will help you to spend less and cause you less stress during the week because you know what you will serve each day.

Get input from your family. Ask your family what their favorite dishes are. Plan several meals around these dishes, using index or note cards. As you try new a dish, if your family likes it, make a new menu card and mark the card with a star. Save these cards for quick and healthy meals that your family likes. Stick to tried-and-true recipes that don't have too many ingredients and that can be prepared in a short amount of time.

Buy large portions of meats. Bake, boil, roast or grill chicken parts to use in more than one meal. Separate a large package of ground meat into smaller packages and freeze for later use. Remember to label and date the individual packages.

Choose meals that also can be leftovers for lunch or frozen for later. For example, a rotisserie chicken can be part of dinner one night and the leftovers easily used for making chicken salad sandwiches for lunch the next day. You can also use the carcass to make broth for soups and gumbos.

Cook once; eat twice. Whenever you're cooking basic foods like rice, beans, pasta or ground meat make more than what you need for the meal. Plan on using the extra as part of a meal later in the week.

Work ahead. Cut up fruit and vegetables to speed up dinner and lunch preparations and provide healthy snacks ready to grab and go. When this step is already done, you will be more apt to use your produce before it goes bad.

Prepare individual servings. Package your own treats, juice and snacks instead of buying prepackaged items on the go. Snack-size plastic storage bags are the perfect size for individual servings of crackers, cheese, carrots or cut-up apples. On-the-go items are usually less healthy and always more expensive.

Make leftovers your friend. Prepare enough of a dish to eat multiple times during the week. Making leftovers part of your plan can save money and time. If your family does not want to eat the dish again that week, freeze the leftovers to be eaten later in the month. Be sure to include these frozen dishes in your meal plan.

Keep stock. Clean out refrigerator, freezer and pantry once a month. Use what's on hand before buying more.

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