



How Long Does Food Actually Last?

The honest answer to "is this still good?" — general guidelines for food stored properly, plus what those dates on the package really mean.

In the fridge (after opening / cooking)

Cooked leftovers (the big one)	3–4 days
Raw ground meat / poultry	1–2 days
Raw steaks, chops, roasts	3–5 days
Deli meat (opened)	3–5 days
Cooked rice & pasta	3–4 days
Pizza in the box	3–4 days
Eggs (in shell)	3–5 weeks
Milk (opened)	about 1 week
Hard cheese (cheddar, parm)	3–4 weeks
Soft cheese (cream cheese)	1–2 weeks
Butter	1–3 months
Opened pasta sauce	4–5 days
Opened condiments (ketchup, mustard)	months — relax
Berries	3–7 days
Bagged salad (opened)	3–5 days

Fridge at or below 40°F. Leftovers go in within 2 hours of cooking — not "after the movie."

 **Dad's Quick Take:** Leftovers get 3–4 days, no exceptions, and "it smells fine" is not a food-safety certification. When in doubt, throw it out — a burrito is cheaper than food poisoning.

Freezer (quality, not safety — frozen food keeps)

Cooked leftovers / meal prep	2–3 months
Ground meat	3–4 months
Chicken pieces	up to 9 months
Steaks & roasts	4–12 months
Bread	2–3 months
Pizza	1–2 months

Label the bag with what it is + the date. Mystery Freezer Lumps never get eaten.

Decoder: the dates on the package

"Best if used by"	Quality, not safety. Usually fine after — might just taste less great.
"Sell by"	A note for the store, not for you. You typically have days more at home.
"Use by"	The one to respect — last date for peak quality; take it seriously on ready-to-eat food.

Baby formula is the only product with a federally required safety date. Everything else is mostly the manufacturer guessing conservatively.

Toss it, don't debate it

- ☐ Anything moldy that isn't hard cheese (cut 1" around mold on hard cheese; soft stuff goes)
- ☐ Cans that bulge, leak, or spray when opened
- ☐ Anything that smells sour, funky, or "off" — trust your nose on this side only
- ☐ Slimy deli meat, sticky chicken, gray-green anything
- ☐ Leftovers older than 4 days, no matter how good the memory