



Fact Sheet

Donating safe and nutritious food to food pantries and soup kitchens

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Introduction

The United States (U.S.) has an abundance of food; yet many people in the U.S. still suffer from food insecurity and utilize food assistance, such as food pantries and soup kitchens. Hungry families could use some of

the significant proportion of the U.S. food supply that regularly goes to waste. In fact, an estimated 30-40 percent of the U.S. food supply is wasted—that is, not available for human consumption—with 31 percent food loss at the retail and consumer levels. Food retailer and consumer donations of safe and healthy food to entities such as food pantries and soup kitchens can help feed those hungry families while reducing food waste.

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Some groups may be reluctant to donate food that would otherwise go to waste for fear they will be liable if the food they donate makes someone sick. Therefore, the U.S. Congress in 1996 passed the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act to reduce potential donor liability for donations made in good faith. In particular, this act can help grocery stores, restaurants and similar retail organizations feel more comfortable about donating food, instead of needlessly sending food to the landfill.

However, it is critical that such entities receive food donations that are as safe and nutritious as possible so that more people have access to safe and healthy food, rather than just whatever food has been in the back of someone's cupboard too long. This lesson provides food safety tips for people who are donating food to such entities, as well as for groups organizing food drives.

Donating to a food bank or pantry?

When you donate food to a food bank or food pantry, it is important to refrain from just cleaning out your cupboard and donating the foods you don't want or can't use anymore. Food pantries do not want to waste food either, but don't want to provide unsafe or unhealthy food to their customers. Cash donations also are greatly appreciated by food banks and food pantries, and offer an option for supporting these organizations without running into the described food safety concerns.

For those interested in donating food, here are some answers to frequently asked questions that will help donors avoid food waste while

providing safe and healthy food to food banks and food pantries.

Can I donate "expired" food? **No**

- Do not donate food that is past its "best by," "use by" or "sell by" date. More information on these food product label dates is available from University of Missouri Extension.¹
 - However, it is considered safe for food pantries to distribute some foods,² and for consumers to use some foods,³ for a certain time period beyond these dates. That time period varies by the type of food. Still, the best practice is to not donate any food past these best, sell or use dates, since it may take a while for the food to actually get to the consumer. Note that baby food and baby formula should never be used past their expiration dates.
- Do not donate any foods that are spoiled or rotten (or starting to look that way), as the food will likely not make it to the beneficiary while it is still safe or enjoyable to eat. The food pantry would needlessly have to throw away and possibly clean up after the spoiled food.

Can I donate damaged packages? **In general, No**

- If a canned food has a sharp dent, a dent deep enough to rest a finger in, severe rust pits, swollen or bulging ends or any evidence of leaking, the food is unsafe to eat. You should throw away canned vegetables or other canned foods that have dents of any size. If canned fruit has a small dent but is not leaking, rusty or swollen and smells OK, it should be safe to eat.

¹Londa Nwadike, "Food Product Dating: What do those dates mean?" MissouriFamilies.org, August 2014, http://missourifamilies.org/foodsafety/newsletters/FSfactsheet_productdating_Aug2014.pdf.

²Safe and Healthy Food Pantries Project, "For Food Safety Sake: Keep or Toss?" University of Wisconsin-Extension, <http://fyi.uwex.edu/safehealthypantries/files/2015/05/Tool-10b.pdf>.

³Visit www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3131.pdf for more information on safe food storage times in the cupboard, and www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3130.pdf for safe food storage times in the refrigerator and freezer.

- Any glass jars that have a damaged tamper-resistant seal or cracks or chips also should be discarded, as they may not be safe.
- Plastic or paperboard containers that have damaged tamper-resistant seals should be discarded.
- The University of Wisconsin Safe and Healthy Food Pantries Project⁴ has excellent resources, including a list of signs that foods may be unsafe to eat and should be discarded. North Carolina State University⁵ also has a flowchart poster that shows when it is safe to use dented cans.

Can I donate home-canned or home-prepared foods? No



- Because of the risk of botulism in improperly canned foods and the large variation in the safety levels of home canning methods, food banks and food pantries should not accept any home-canned items.
- Home-baked items may have a shorter shelf life than commercially prepared baked goods and present other food safety risks,

so food pantries should only accept food baked at a licensed establishment.

Can I donate repackaged food? No

- Donate food in its original packaging, with the label still intact. Packaging should be unopened and undamaged, because there's a risk the food will become contaminated during repackaging or if the packaging is damaged.

Can I donate things other than shelf-stable (nonperishable) foods? It depends

- Contact the food pantry or food bank to confirm it can accept perishable items, as adequate refrigeration must be available to allow such organizations to accept and safely keep perishable foods. Be sure to check with them before donating.
- Perishable foods should be in their unopened original packaging with the label intact.
- Milk and juice must be pasteurized.
- Meat, poultry and seafood must come from a licensed processor. Donated eggs should follow the legal requirements outlined in K-State Research and Extension (KSRE) publication 3138.⁶
- Be sure that perishable foods have been kept below 41 degrees F and arrive at the pantry with an internal temperature of below 41 degrees F.
- Be sure that frozen foods have not thawed and been refrozen. Check to be sure that frozen foods do not have large ice crystals—which indicate the food may have thawed and refrozen—and are not soft to the touch or leaking.

⁴Safe and Healthy Food Pantries Project, Put Safe Food on the Shelf," University of Wisconsin-Extension, <http://fyi.uwex.edu/safehealthypantries/food-safety-in-your-pantry/put-safe-food-on-the-shelf/>.

⁵North Carolina State University Extension, "Can I use this can?" <https://foodsafety.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Can-I-use-this-can.pdf?fwd=no>.

⁶Londa Nwadike, "Food Safety for Kansas Farmers Market Vendors: Regulations and Best Practices," Kansas State University, January 2017, www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3138.pdf.

Can I donate fresh produce? It depends

- First, contact the food pantry or food bank to confirm it can accept fresh produce.
- Be sure to use good gardening practices, or ensure that the person who raised the produce used such practices. For example, do not use fresh, uncomposted manure for fertilizer. Kansas State University Extension has more information on improving the safety of the produce you grow.⁷
- If possible, produce should be picked in the morning and delivered to the food pantry or food bank for distribution that same day.
- Some produce items should be picked before they are fully ripe to extend their shelf life.
- Handle produce gently to prevent bruises, nicks and cuts, all of which can cause produce to spoil faster.
- It is best to not wash many types of produce before distribution, as the extra moisture can promote spoilage. However, if produce such as potatoes are dirty, they could be rinsed with drinkable water and allowed to dry completely before storing.
- Keep fresh produce as cool as possible, but do not freeze.
- Donate produce that has a remaining shelf life of at least three to five days.
- The University of Missouri has additional useful tips in "Safely Harvesting and Handling Produce for Donation to Food Pantries and Food Banks"⁸ and "Donating Produce From Farms and Gardens."⁹

What should I donate?

- Try to donate foods that would fill a healthy and safe plate for the consumer, based on MyPlate recommendations.

Food Group	Suggested Non-Perishable Items
 Fruits	Canned in light syrup or juice; dried: - peaches - fruit cocktail - oranges - pears - applesauce - apples - cranberries (canned/dried) - raisins - pineapple - 100% fruit juice
 Vegetables	Low sodium canned: - corn - peas - carrots - beets - green & wax beans - mixed vegetables - sweet potatoes/yams - tomatoes and tomato sauces - soup
 Grains	Healthful Grains: - whole-grain crackers - brown rice - whole grain pasta - whole-grain breakfast cereal - whole wheat flour - cornmeal - oatmeal - granola bars
 Protein	Protein Foods: - canned or dried beans: kidney, navy, garbanzo, pinto, great northern, black - canned tuna or salmon (water packed) - canned chicken - nuts: walnuts, pecans, peanuts, almonds - nut butters
 Dairy	Dairy: - nonfat dry milk - evaporated milk - shelf-stable (UHT) milk
For individuals with limited kitchen access: - single-serve, canned pull-tab foods such as fruits, vegetables, pastas, stews, chili, beanie-weenies, ravioli, meats such as Vienna sausages, chicken and noodles, pasta with meat, etc. - individual 100% juice boxes	
Contact your local food pantry to find out what other items they may need. Consider gluten-free, dairy-free, nut free items as well.	

- Cash donations are also very useful to food banks and food pantries, as they generally can buy food in bulk much more cheaply than consumers can. Also, they can buy the items that their clients need the most, without having to take the time to sort and move donated items.
- The University of Wisconsin also has resources that provide more information on good foods to donate,¹⁰ as well as unwanted food donations.¹¹

⁷See Lisa Martin, "Garden to Plate: Food Safety for School and Community Gardens," Kansas State University, August 2014, <https://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3152.pdf>; Kansas State University, "Extension Food Safety," www.ksre.k-state.edu/foodsafety/produce/index.html.

⁸Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security, "Safely Harvesting and Handling Produce for Donation to Food Pantries and Food Banks," University of Missouri, <http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Harvesting-and-Handling.pdf>.

⁹Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security, "Donating Produce From Farms and Gardens," University of Missouri, <http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Donating.pdf>.

¹⁰Safe and Healthy Food Pantries Project, "Make your Donation Count," University of Wisconsin-Extension, <http://fyi.uwex.edu/safehealthypantries/files/2015/05/Tool-4b.pdf>.

¹¹Safe and Healthy Food Pantries Project, "10 Most Unwanted," University of Wisconsin-Extension, <http://fyi.uwex.edu/safehealthypantries/files/2015/05/Tool-3b.pdf>.

Organizing a food drive?

A community food drive is an excellent opportunity for donors to participate in a local service project, and for recipients to obtain safe and nutritious food. However, it is important when organizing a food drive to encourage people to donate safe and healthy foods, and foods that the food bank or pantry needs. Food banks or pantries should provide potential donors with a list of suggested nutritious and safe donations. Organizers could also make specific suggestions of food types to donate on different days of the week, or come up with another method to get a variety of healthy and safe foods that will benefit food pantry clients. The University of Missouri website has additional tips on organizing healthy food drives, including a list of nutritious foods to donate.¹²

Donating to a soup kitchen—prepared foods

Many times, after a large fundraising meal, festival or other event where large amounts of food are prepared, substantial amounts of food may be left over. Donating the leftover food to soup kitchens, homeless shelters or similar facilities may help feed people in need and avoid wasting the food, but it is always important to check with the relevant food safety agency (in Missouri, check with your local public health department) to ensure that relevant regulations are followed and that the food is as safe as possible to donate.

Although every local health department may have different regulations, it is advisable to follow all the best practices listed below.

Best practices:

- It currently is a best practice to donate only food that was prepared by a licensed food establishment, such as a restaurant or caterer.



- Donated food must have been handled throughout its preparation, distribution and cleanup using good food safety practices, such as those outlined in an MU Extension publication entitled “Volunteer Quantity Cooking Safety.”¹³
 - Do not donate food that has already been served, such as put out on a buffet or on a plate at a table. The only foods that can be donated are those that were prepared but not served—not put out on a buffet line or on a plate at a table—to reduce the likelihood that the donated food has been contaminated.
 - The food must have been kept either above 135 degrees F or below 41 degrees F. If the product was cooled after cooking, the internal product temperature must get from 135 degrees F to below 70 degrees F within the first two hours and to 41 degrees F or below within a total of six hours. Upon arrival at the food pantry or soup kitchen, the food’s internal temperature must be either above 135 degrees F or below 41 degrees F, as measured by a food thermometer. Insulated containers may be required to keep the food at the proper temperature.
 - Foods must be stored and transported in a food-safe container. For example, food must not be stored in a garbage bag.

¹²Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security, “Healthy Food Drive Tips,” University of Missouri, <http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Healthy-Food-Drive-Tips.pdf>.

¹³Londa Nwadike, “Volunteer Quantity Cooking Safety,” University of Missouri Extension, <http://extension.missouri.edu/p/N1303>.

- The food should be clearly labeled with the name of the food, its date of preparation and the donor of the food.
- Everyone handling the food must follow good hygienic practices, such as regular hand-washing.
- Any prepared food that's donated should be used within one or two days. Prepared food can be stored no more than seven days at 41 degrees F or lower before serving.

Next steps

Based on the information above, develop a list of the top three points you will consider the next time you donate to a food bank or soup kitchen or organize a food drive:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

References and sources for further information

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