
Reducing Food Waste

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At a glance

Reducing our food waste can seem challenging at times. This lesson will help you learn ways to reduce your daily food waste and save you money.

Objectives

After this lesson, participants should be able to:

- Identify the amount of food wasted in the U.S. and the relationship to hunger.
- Describe at least two ways that wasted food impacts the environment.
- Identify how to reduce food waste at home.

Introduction

Food waste is a growing problem that affects all consumers. In this lesson we will be learning about food waste, and how it impacts hunger, food insecurity, food costs and the environment. We will explore ways you can reduce food waste in your own home. By learning to reduce food waste not only will you save money, but you will also help conserve natural resources like air, soil and water quality, and make a positive impact on food insecurity & hunger.

Why are food loss and waste important?

There is a growing concern about food loss and waste throughout the United States. It is estimated that about 40% of food grown from farms in the United States will never make it to the consumers table. Totaling up to about 90 billion pounds of edible food that goes uneaten each year.

Food is wasted everywhere from farm to table, but in the U.S. most of our food is wasted later in the food supply chain with retailers, restaurants, food service, and in households like yours and mine. Consumers are the biggest offender –wasting approximately 15-20% of our food.

Food loss is defined as the decrease in quantity or quality of food. Food loss in the production and distribution segments of the food supply chain is mainly a function of the food production and supply system or its institutional and legal framework. Food waste (which is a component of food loss) is defined as any removal of food from the food supply chain which is or was at some point fit for human consumption, or which has spoiled or expired, mainly caused by economic behavior, poor stock management or neglect.

On average, Americans throw out 23 lbs. of potentially edible food per person each month. Not only is it wasteful, but it's expensive. This waste costs the average family of four as much as \$190 per month (estimated range for a family is \$1,365 to \$2,275 per year). The 90 billion pounds of edible food that is wasted each year in our country costs consumers at least \$370 per/person. Pound for pound, fruits and vegetables are the most likely foods to be wasted due to spoilage. We toss out 19% of vegetables and 15% of fruit in the typical home. This does not include the inedible portions of fruit and vegetables like banana peels or onion skins. However, tossing out protein foods such as meat, fish, poultry & eggs adds up to more food dollars down the drain.

Ask participants to take a moment to answer these questions

- Have you threw anything out of your fridge in the past week?
- How many pounds of food would you guess that you throw out every month?

How this problem affect Americans

While we are wasting 40% of our food, 1 in 6 Americans (1:5 children) are food insecure. That means they don't have regular access to enough food for a healthy, active life. For the more than 48 million people in the United States who face hunger, putting food on the table every day is a struggle and often means making impossible choices.

Food that's thrown away is a missed opportunity to put safe, healthy food on the table for the millions of Americans who don't have enough food to eat. Feeding America, a hunger relief organization estimates if food waste was cut as little as 15%, it would be enough to put food on the table for 25 million who are food insecure.

What can you do to help reduce food waste?

Before you go shopping or plan a meal, shop your refrigerator and pantry first.

- Begin planning meals with foods you already have before that food goes bad. Label your leftover containers with the date on a removable label. You can even mark it, “eat me first” or “don’t eat, this is for dinner.”

Plan your grocery trip.

- Use a grocery list and stick to it, it will help you reduce waste and save you money.
- Resist sales on unusual items and promotions that encourage impulse purchases – these often lead us to purchase foods that don’t fit into our regular meal plan or lifestyle and spoil before they can be used.
- Purchasing in smaller quantities may be more cost effective and decrease wasted food especially if you live in a small household.
- Balance your purchase of fresh fruits and veggies that ripen or spoil more quickly (bananas, berries, cucumbers, summer squash, tomatoes, lettuce) with produce that has a longer storage time (apples, cabbage, carrots, potatoes, winter squash).
- Create a weekly menu incorporating the highly perishable produce early in the week.
- Stock frozen, canned and dried fruit at home as these provide good nutrition benefits are less expensive during the winter months and have longer shelf life than fresh produce.

Be Food Safe

- Refrigerate perishable food within 2 hours this includes meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy products, cut fruits and vegetables and all cooked leftovers.
- Use a refrigerator thermometer to make sure the temperature is always set at or below 40°F. Set your freezer at 00 F or lower. If stored consistently frozen food will stay good indefinitely. Reheat leftover food to 1650 F and check using a food thermometer.

Use the Label for best quality

- It is estimated that over 90% of people prematurely discard food before it is truly bad due to the confusion over the meaning of date labels. s. In reality, “sell by” and “use by” dates are not federally regulated and only serve as manufacturer suggestions for peak quality. Even if the "best if used by" or ‘sell by” date has passed on a food you have at home, it should be safe if stored and handled properly.

For example; if unopened and properly stored in the refrigerator a carton of yogurt will remain safe long after the “best by” date. Product date labeling is currently under revision to reduce confusion & consumer waste.

Smart Food Storage

- Some fruits and veggies should be stored in the refrigerator while others are cold sensitive and should be stored at room temperature
- Produce that has a short life span once ripened like apricots, blackberries, raspberries and strawberries and herbs, sprouts, corn, cucumbers, eggplant, green beans, leafy greens, lima beans, mushrooms, peas and summer squash should be used within a couple of days of purchase, when possible. If you see that your produce is going bad, you can freeze it and use in a smoothie at a later date!
- Fresh produce that has a long life, includes fruits like apples, blueberries, grapes and pears and vegetables like beets without top greens, artichokes, cabbage, carrots, celery, garlic, leeks, onions, parsnips, potatoes and winter squash.
- Food spoils due to improper storage and poor visibility in refrigerators. Foods are less likely to go bad if you use the oldest food items first. Organize your refrigerator and pantry so that new foods are behind the old foods, that way those food items are the first to be seen and the first to be used.

Food Preparation and Quick Tips

- Avoid Over-Preparing - One-third of household food waste is the result of people cooking or serving too much food. Recipe portions in cookbooks have increased over time. Use recipes scaled to work for your size of household. If you do have leftover food divide into serving size portions and freeze for later use.
- Trim fruits and veggies to get as much edible portion as possible. Small leftover pieces can be frozen or dehydrated and used later in soups, stews or casseroles.
- Repurpose leftovers by creatively using them in soups or toss small amounts of leftover veggies, meat, chicken or fish and cheese into a salad. Grate small amounts of leftover cheese and mix in olives, nuts or fruit for a tasty spread for bread or crackers. Toast and crumble old bread for use in recipes or as croutons for salad. The ideas are endless.
- Use your freezer wisely keeping the temperature set to 0 F or below. Milk, butter, yogurt and hard cheese can all be frozen. Some vegetables need blanching before

freezing to preserve the quality but most fruit needs little preparation. For example; over-ripe bananas can be frozen whole and make wonderful smoothies or banana bread. For more information on how to freeze foods go to the National Center for Home Food preservation web site at: <http://nchfp.uga.edu/how/freeze.html>

- Create a home composting system, which can be as simple as collecting scraps from fruit, vegetables and leftover coffee grounds/ tea bags and egg shells in a paper bag then putting in an open air bin outside. Because home compost is exposed to oxygen -- either by turning it or through the use of worms and other living organisms- it produces CO₂ (carbon dioxide) instead of methane gas and recycles nutrients which can be added back to the home garden.
- Donate excess packaged food and fruits and vegetables from your home garden or orchard. Contact your local food bank, food pantry, church or charitable meals site to determine what type of donations they will accept. Remember however, that it is more cost effective and less labor intensive to donate money to these organizations so they can purchase the specific foods most in need.

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