

Reducing Food Waste

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You have probably been told at least once in your life to “clean your plate” during a meal. The fact of the matter is that the United States is one of the largest food wasters in the world with nearly 70 BILLION pounds of food thrown away annually. Reducing the amount of food thrown away will not only save money, it is also good for the environment. What can be done to combat the issue of food waste? Let’s explore the topic and find some solutions to save money while also reducing our environmental impact.



Before we get to solutions about food waste, let’s talk trash.

How much food goes to waste in your household?

On average, American households throw away one quarter (25%) of the food they purchase. Based on the amount of money spent on groceries and eating away from home, that adds up to a hefty amount of cash. Consider for a moment how much you spend each month (\$500, \$1000, or \$1500 or more...) and how much of the food you purchase eventually gets thrown away for one reason or another. Stale crackers, wilted lettuce, moldy leftovers or half eaten meals all end up in the garbage. You would never throw away \$100, and certainly would not toss \$250-300 in the trash, yet we have no problem throwing away food. Today we live in a world of excess. We have more food options than ever, yet we throw away money, in the form of food waste, at alarming rates every day.

Why does food end up in the trash instead of on the dinner table?

Eating out: When eating out, we can’t (nor should we try to) finish the enormous portions served at our favorite restaurants, and it’s a pain to take leftovers home to reheat/eat later. There are so many restaurants to choose from...why would we even want to cook or eat at home? And...no one needs to wash the dishes when we eat out, so we convince ourselves it is a win-win situation. Cooking and eating meals at home is healthier and costs less overall.

Over buying: We buy fresh foods like meat, produce, bread and dairy items, then forget to use them before things expire, go bad, or spoil. We see a great price at the store (or we are hungry when we go shopping) and buy more than we need or can use in a reasonable timeframe.

Lack of effort/planning/recycling: We don’t want to take the time and effort to make the meal that sounded so wonderful while we were at the grocery store. Or, we don’t want to take the time and effort to repack items we buy in bulk, which would make them easier to use in a smaller quantity. We don’t recycle the items that could avoid the landfill altogether by recycling, instead we put it all in the trash.

Improper storage: We can’t see through the clutter in the refrigerator to find the items we should be using first. We forget to rotate older items to the front of the cupboard, pantry, or refrigerator and food expires before we use it up. Partially eaten food and open packages get dry, stale, rancid, or even worse.... get BUGS in them.

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What's the BIG deal, why does wasted food matter?

Aside from wasting money on food that is never eaten, there is a larger environmental impact that occurs when food goes in the trash. Not to get too scientific on you, but food waste is organic material that decomposes (even after it is in a landfill) causing a stench and releasing methane gas as it rots. Methane gas is not good for the planet and is also called one of the greenhouse gases because it influences global warming. Although a small amount of food waste probably isn't a BIG deal, food waste is at an all-time high and has become a major factor impacting our environment.

You may be thinking... there are no landfill concerns if your municipality uses incinerators, right? Wrong... burning trash releases additional air pollutants which also cause

problems for the environment and air quality. Next, consider the numerous inorganic materials that are combined with food waste that are overflowing our landfills and may take a lifetime, or longer, to break down, like plastic bottles, Styrofoam take-out containers, disposable straws, food wrappers, and other packaging. All of these factors add up to a problem for the planet we call home.



If we want to reduce our personal food waste where should we start?

Let's start at home and take stock of what we already have. Organize the cupboards, the pantry, the refrigerator and the old deep freezer (if you have one) to get rid of anything you know you will not use, like the freezer-burned mystery meat from 2015. Clearly label any food that is not in an easily recognizable container or package. Put perishable items and those with the closest expiration dates toward the front so they are easy to find and use before they go bad. Each time you open a multi-use food package, write the date it was opened on the top with a permanent marker, so you never have to wonder...How long has this been in here??? Then, either reseal the package or place the whole thing in an airtight container to preserve freshness.

Before you get overly excited and throw away any shelf stable items that are past their "Sell by", "Best By", or "Use By" date. Remember that shelf stable items, like canned goods (without dents) and dry goods, like pasta, beans, or flour CAN be used well past the date listed on the package. In many cases the best by, or use by, date represents the absolute best quality of the product, not the date that an item goes bad. In contrast, shelf stable products that contain shortening or fat, like pancake mix, packaged crackers, cookies, or Chinese noodles, can go rancid over time, which means the oil in the product has gone bad. A good rule of thumb is to give dry goods a sniff, and if they have a funky odor or smell nasty, it is best to toss them out rather than risk getting sick. If an item smells fine, then it is acceptable to use.

After your pantry is re-organized, create a monthly plan to help manage your meals. This might include a specific day of the week to eat out or limit the amount you spend or the number of times that you eat away from home each month to reduce your spending habits. When you do eat out, consider sharing a

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meal with a family member or eating half and taking half home for another day (then actually reheat and eat the leftovers). Plan a weekly menu to guide your meal prep and grocery shopping to utilize older food items that you found in the pantry, refrigerator and freezer while they are still tasty and nutritious. It is helpful to use a variety of protein sources or entrees to get a balance of nutrients as well as flavors. At the start of each week, take out any frozen items that need time to thaw before cooking, and place them in the refrigerator. Build some flexibility into your meal plan to allow for spontaneity and the need to use any fresh ingredients you have on hand before they spoil as well as leftovers from the meals prepared. A typical week may include 5 planned meals and 2 flexible meals that could be at a restaurant or using leftovers.

Whether at a restaurant or grocery store, buy/order only what you need

When you are ready to go to the grocery store, make a list based on your meal plan and choose items that fit your plan while also being gentle on your wallet. When the opportunity to stock-up presents itself, think about how often you use that particular food and how much can be used before the quality is diminished. Try to find a balance between the sale price and the amount that makes sense for your meal patterns. For example, a 12 pound bag of flour may be less expensive by weight than a 5 pound bag, but if you will not use it within a year, then the purchase is probably not worth the difference in price.



Another area to consider while you're shopping is the packaging of each food option. Is the item you want packaged in individual servings or a large quantity all together, and which packaging style creates less trash while still meeting your needs? Look for products that minimize the amount of plastic and other inorganic packaging. If packaging is recyclable, that might be a better option, but only if you will take the time to sort it and take it to your neighborhood recycling facility. If you have curbside recycling pick up, it is convenient to use that service.

Plan to use what you purchase

After you buy specific food items, plan to use them efficiently to maximize your food budget and reduce spoilage. If you have a bunch of fresh vegetables on hand, be sure to plan a salad, stir fry, or other recipe to use those items. Take stock of what you have on hand often and keep your food stock rotated with the oldest items used first and stored in an easily accessible spot. Many people say they want less stress or more organization in their lives, yet they aren't willing to take a few minutes each week to plan for healthy meals that use what they have on-hand. Prioritize the behaviors and routines that make sense for your situation, while avoiding the impulse to eat out.

Store food properly

Keeping food fresh after it is opened is an effective way to stretch your food dollar. Whether you choose fancy, brand names or generic reusable containers, food storage has come a long way to preserving the freshness and nutritional value of our favorite foods. Keep in mind that although disposable zip lock

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bags are convenient and affordable, they add to the problem of inorganic food waste. Another consideration is how leftover items will be reheated. If you like to microwave leftovers, be aware that not all containers are appropriate for food storage and/or safe to use in the microwave, especially when it comes to plastic. Some plastic ware has symbols to show consumers whether it can be safely heated in the microwave, placed in the dishwasher, or used in the freezer or oven. Each of these symbols should be self-explanatory.



Avoid the trash

Whenever possible, choose products that limit packing waste. When storing food items, opt for washable, reusable storage containers that will last. Do your part to recycle. Break down cardboard boxes, rinse cans and bottles, and learn what types of plastic can be recycled in your area. Whether you have curbside collection, or you bring recycling to a designated location, make the effort to limit your impact on the environment by not throwing away items that could be recycled with just a small effort.

Consider starting a food compost. Produce can be easily composted at home to create nutrient-rich soil for your garden, patio pots, or house plants. This can be as simple a gallon size bucket under the kitchen sink or a large trash can in the garage or back yard, either way, you can reduce the amount of food waste in the landfill and share the process with your children to show them how they can improve the environment too. If you choose to start composting, there are a few food items that should not be composted. For best results, avoid putting meat scraps, milk products, and greasy food in your compost.

As with any change, learning to reduce your food waste will take some time and effort, but the results will help keep more money in your pocket and reduce the negative impact on the environment.

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