

Cleaning the Kitchen Cupboard: Toss or Save?



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Have you looked — REALLY looked — at the foods in your kitchen cupboards lately? Is it time to bid some foods a fond farewell? Should others be moved to a better location and/or storage container? Can you “revive” some aging foods so they still can be used?

Read on for tips to help you decide whether to toss, move or try to save common kitchen cupboard foods.

Storing Kitchen Cupboard Foods

The following storage tips are based on food stored at a room temperature of about 70° F. The times are those generally cited for maintaining best food quality. A range of times and the more conservative recommendations are given to allow for age of the product when purchased, how long it has been open, etc. **READ LABELS CAREFULLY** — they often contain important storage information and recommended “use by” dates.

Baking Powder — 12 to 18 months or expiration date on container

Storage Tip: Store tightly covered in a dry place. Make sure measuring utensils are dry before dipping into the container.

Testing for Freshness: Mix 1 teaspoon baking powder with 1/3 cup hot water. If it foams vigorously, it still has rising power.

Baking Soda — 12 to 18 months or expiration date on container

Storage Tip: Store tightly covered in a dry place. Make sure measuring utensils are dry before dipping them into the container.

Testing for Freshness: Place 1-1/2 teaspoons in a small bowl. Add 1 tablespoon vinegar. If it fizzes, then it will still help leaven a food. If it doesn't fizz, use it as an odor catcher in the refrigerator.

Shortening — 3 to 8 months opened; 8 to 12 months unopened

Storage Tip #1: Store in a tightly closed container in a cool, dark place.

Storage Tip #2: Times reported by shortening companies and other sources varied. For more specifics, see “Kitchen Cupboard Management 101” at the end of this article for suggestions on how to contact the company for more information.

Storage Tip #3: Shortening that has been stored too long will go rancid and develop an undesirable taste and odor. If you haven't used a shortening for a while, smell it before using it in a recipe.



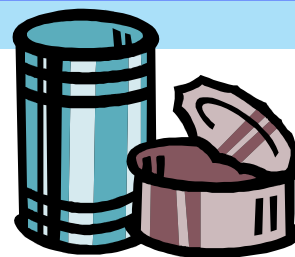
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Canned Foods — 1 to 2 years

Storage Tip #1: The Canned Food Alliance <www.mealtime.org> recommends eating canned food within 2 years of PROCESSING for best quality. Many cans will include a “for best quality use by” date stamped somewhere on the can. In a well run and busy store there should be a fairly constant turnover of canned goods, with cans on the shelf only a short time before you purchase them, according to the Canned Food Alliance. Some products contain a code, which varies among companies, that identifies the production date. If you have a concern over how old a food is, call the company’s toll-free number (if listed on the can) or write to the address on the can.

Storage Tip #2: Avoid refrigerating OPENED canned foods in their can. Food can develop an off-odor from the can, once opened. Transfer to another storage container.



Popcorn (other than ready-to-pop microwave popcorn) — 2 years

Storage Tip #1: Store in an airtight glass or plastic container in a cool place, such as a cupboard.

Storage Tip #2: The National Popcorn Board <www.popcorn.org> recommends AGAINST storing popcorn in the refrigerator. The kernels are more likely to dry out in the refrigerator and do not pop as well. It’s the water inside a popcorn kernel that expands when the popcorn is heated, causing the kernel to explode or “pop.”



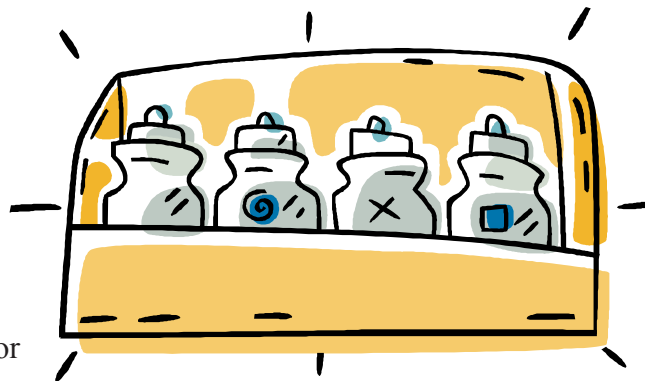
Spices and Herbs — 1 year for herbs or ground spices, 2 years for whole spices

Storage Tip #1: Air, light, moisture and heat speed flavor and color loss of herbs and spices. Store in a tightly covered container in a dark place away from sunlight, such as inside a cupboard or drawer. For open spice rack storage, choose a site away from light, heat and moisture. Keep moisture out of containers by:

- Avoiding storage above or near the stove, dishwasher, microwave, refrigerator, sink or a heating vent.
- Always using a dry spoon to remove spices or herbs.
- Never sprinkling directly from the container into a steaming pot.

Storage Tip #2: Refrigerate paprika, chili powder and red pepper for best color retention, especially in summer or hotter climates. Be aware herbs and spices can get wet if condensation forms when a cold container from your refrigerator or freezer is left open in a humid kitchen.

Give Spices and Herbs the “Sniff” Test: Depending on storage and quality of the spice or herb, some may last longer than others. As a check to see if a GROUND SPICE is potent, smell it. If its aroma is immediate, strong and spicy, it should still add flavor to your foods. For a WHOLE spice, such as a clove or cinnamon stick — break, crush or scrape the spice before you smell it. DO NOT smell PEPPER or CHILI POWDER as they can irritate your nose. For HERBS, crush a small amount in your hand and smell it. If the aroma is still fresh and pleasant, it can still flavor foods. If there’s no smell or an off smell, toss it. Get in the habit of smelling your spices and herbs periodically. You’ll learn what fresh smells like so you can begin to detect if they are getting old.

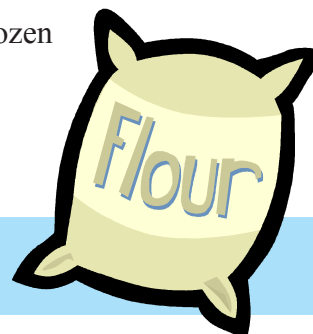


White Flour — 6 to 12 months

Storage Tip #1: Store in a cool, dry place. It's important to store flour in an airtight container or freezer bag to preserve the flour's moisture content. Exposure to low or high humidity will affect the flour's moisture content and may influence the outcome of a recipe.

Storage Tip #2: For longer storage, keep white flours in the refrigerator in an airtight container. All-purpose and bread flour will keep up to two years at 40° F in your refrigerator, according to the Wheat Foods Council <www.wheatfoods.org>. They can be stored indefinitely in the freezer.

Storage Tip #3: As a general rule, if measuring flour from refrigerated or frozen flour, allow your measured portion to come to room temperature before using it in baked goods. Remove the flour for your recipe a few hours before use, so it doesn't affect the action of other ingredients such as baking powder or yeast.



Whole Wheat Flour — 1 to 3 months at room temperature; refrigerate whole wheat flour if you want to keep it longer

Storage Tip #1: For longer storage, whole wheat flour should be stored in an airtight container or freezer bag in the refrigerator or freezer. It will maintain good quality for about 6 months in the refrigerator and up to 12 months in the freezer. The ground wheat germ in whole wheat flour contains oil that can become rancid at room temperature.

Storage Tip #2: Generally, if measuring flour from refrigerated or frozen flour, allow your measured portion to come to room temperature before using it in baked goods. Remove the flour for your recipe a few hours before use, so it doesn't affect the action of other ingredients such as baking powder or yeast.

Tips on Buying Flour Storage Containers

If you'd like to buy an airtight storage container for your white or whole wheat flour, these figures may help determine what size you'll need:

- 1 pound flour = about 4 cups
- 5 pounds of flour = about 20 cups
- 10 pounds of flour = about 40 cups

If the container doesn't give the number of cups it will hold, these figures may help you:

- 8 fluid ounces = 1 cup
- 1 pint = 2 cups
- 1 quart = 4 cups
- 1 gallon = 16 cups

Before purchasing a container, assess where you will store the food to determine whether there are any space restrictions for your container. For example, is there a limit to the height of a container needed to fit onto a certain shelf.

Select a container that is easy to use when you need to measure out ingredients. Also, check to be sure the lid is easy to open and close tightly.

Honey — 12 months

Storage Tip: Honey stores best at room temperature. It tends to crystallize more rapidly, a natural process in which its liquid turns solid, in the refrigerator.

Revitalizing Crystallized Honey: The National Honey Board <www.honey.com> recommends revitalizing crystallized honey by placing the jar in warm water and stirring the honey until the crystals dissolve.



Brown Sugar — 4 months to 6 months for maximum flavor

Storage Tip: It's VERY important to store brown sugar in an airtight container to retain its moisture and prevent it from becoming hard. Either store it in its original plastic bag, tightly closed, or transfer to an airtight container or a heavy moisture-proof plastic bag, such as a freezer bag.

To Soften Brown Sugar: Brown sugar becomes hard when the moisture in it has evaporated.

Several methods have been suggested to help restore the moisture to brown sugar; here's an overview of those mentioned most frequently:

- **Oven Method.** Heat the brown sugar in a 250° F oven for a few minutes. Watch it carefully and as soon as it is soft, measure the amount you need. When the sugar cools, it will become hard again. Warning: the sugar will be very hot.
- **Microwave Method.** Place brown sugar in a microwave-safe container and cover loosely with a clean, white, wet (but not dripping wet) paper towel. Microwave on high (100 percent power) and check about every 30 seconds. When the sugar cools, it will become hard again. Warning: the sugar will be very hot.

White Granulated Sugar — 2 years

Storage Tip: Store sugar in an airtight container or a heavy moisture-proof plastic bag, such as a freezer bag. Properly stored sugar keeps indefinitely.

To Soften Hardened White Sugar: When white granulated sugar absorbs moisture, it becomes hard. Here are some possible suggestions for breaking up hard sugar:

- Put hard sugar in a sturdy food-quality bag and pound it with a hammer, meat pounder or flat side of a meat mallet.
- Smash smaller pieces with a mortar and pestle.
- Break up small pieces in a spice grinder.

Tips on Buying a Sugar Storage Container

If you'd like to buy an airtight storage container for your white granulated sugar, these figures may help determine what size you'll need:

- 1 pound of sugar = about 2 1/4 cups
- 5 pounds of sugar = about 11 1/2 cups

If the container doesn't give the number of cups it will hold, these figures may help you:

- 8 fluid ounces = 1 cup
- 1 pint = 2 cups
- 1 quart = 4 cups
- 1 gallon = 16 cups

Before purchasing a container, assess where you will store the food to determine whether there are any space restrictions for your container. For example, is there a limit to the height of a container needed to fit onto a certain shelf. Select a container that is easy to access when you need to measure out ingredients. Also, check to be sure the lid is easy to open and close tightly.

Vegetable Oil — 1 to 6 months opened; 6 to 12 months unopened

Times vary according to type of oil, method of processing, etc. Some companies recommend up to 1 year opened and 2 years unopened for certain of their oils. For oils with a shorter storage time, some companies recommend refrigerating the oil after opening. See “Kitchen Cupboard Management 101” at the end of this article for suggestions on how to contact the company for more information. NOTE: If the container has sat unopened for the total storage time, it no longer may be fresh the entire “opened” storage time.

Storage Tip #1: Store in a tightly closed container in a cool, dark place.

Storage Tip #2: Some of the oils that may have a shorter storage life include walnut, sesame, hazelnut and almond oils.

Storage Tip #3: Oil that has been stored too long will go rancid and develop an undesirable taste and odor. If you haven’t used an oil for a while, smell it before using it in a recipe.

Storage Tip #4: You can prolong the life of oils by storing them in the refrigerator. Some, such as olive oil, may become cloudy in the refrigerator but usually clear after sitting at room temperature to warm up.

Vinegar — 2 years unopened, 1 year opened (manufacturers’ recommendations vary)

Storage Tip #1: Keep vinegar tightly covered. White vinegar will maintain unchanged longer than other types of vinegar, according to the Vinegar Institute <www.versatilevinegar.org>. The storage life of vinegar is “almost indefinite” because of its acidic nature, according to the Vinegar Institute

Storage Tip #2: The length of storage time recommended by different companies varies, plus may be different for various types of vinegar. For a more specific time range, write, call (many have a toll-free number) or check if this information is on the company’s Web site.



Kitchen Cupboard Management 101

Now that you’ve sorted, tossed, moved and/or repackaged and perhaps revived some foods, here are a few tips to take control of storing foods in your cupboard:

- If you tossed portions of expired foods, buy a smaller container next time.
- Keep a permanent marker pen in your kitchen and put the date — month and YEAR — you purchased the food on the container.
- When in doubt about storage times, call the company (many have toll-free numbers), write to the address on the label, or check if the company has a Web site that might answer your questions.
- If you can’t determine how old a food is and the container contains no “use by” date, check for a production code on container. If it’s not possible to decipher the production code, call or write the company or check if this information might be given on a company Web site.
- Practice “first in, first out,” or what foodservice professionals refer to as FIFO, for foods. If you have purchased several containers of the same type of food, arrange the containers so you reach for the oldest package first.
- READ LABELS CAREFULLY for storage information and possible recommended “use by” dates.

