



Food Donation Safety Guidelines

Thank you for supporting efforts to reduce food waste and help alleviate food insecurity in communities in need! Your contribution plays a vital role in providing families and individuals with access to nutritious meals. To help ensure the safety and quality of the food shared, please review the Food Donation Safety Guidelines below.

Dry Goods & Non-Perishables

Includes items such as canned goods, boxed meals, jarred products, and dry packaged foods.

Donation Timing:

- Commercially packaged dry goods should be donated **on or before the "best by" date**. However, we will accept them **up to 2 weeks past** the best by date as long as they're in good condition.

Canned goods:

- Avoid donating cans that are swollen, bulging, or rusted, as these are indications of spoilage. Small dents on the body are acceptable, as long as they aren't on the rims.
- **Note:** If you have canned goods that are more than 2 weeks past the best by date, please contact us. We might still be able to accept them within a month, depending on their condition.

Cereal & Boxed Goods:

- Cereal and other dry goods in **cardboard packaging** are acceptable for donation, **even if the box is torn**, as long as:
 - The **inner plastic bag** containing the cereal is **still sealed** and intact.
 - The contents of the box are not exposed or compromised.

Unopened Jars & Boxed Meals:

- Items like jars of peanut butter, jam, pasta, rice, boxed meals (e.g., macaroni & cheese), and canned soups or stews should be **unopened**. These are acceptable even if the outer packaging is slightly worn, as long as the product inside is still sealed.

Packaging Integrity:

- Ensure all dry goods, boxes, jars, and bags are in their original, sealed packaging. Do not donate items with damaged or compromised packaging (e.g., broken seals, punctured bags).
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Perishables & Prepared Foods

Includes ready-to-eat foods, items requiring refrigeration, and other prepared meals.

Donation Timing:

- Prepared food should be donated **as soon as possible** after preparation to ensure freshness and safety.
- **Same-Day Donations:** Items with a "**best by**" date of the same day are still acceptable for donation, but must be collected and donated **before the end of the day** to ensure freshness.
- **Note:** The sooner prepared food is donated after preparation, the better its quality and safety.

Storage/Temperature Control:

- Prepared food must be stored at **41°F or below** if chilled, or **frozen** at a commercial facility prior to pickup.
- **Hot Foods:** Hot foods **cannot** be donated if left out for more than **2 hours**.

Labeling:

- Prepared foods must include the following information:
 - Food name
 - Allergens (e.g., dairy, eggs, nuts, soy)
 - Date prepared and use-by date
 - Storage and reheating instructions

Self-Serve Foods: Self-serve salad bars, buffets, and bakery items **cannot** be donated.

Packaging Integrity:

- Foods must be securely packaged in food-grade materials (e.g., sandwiches wrapped in plastic or foil, sushi packed in individual plastic containers).
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Produce

Includes whole and cut fruits and vegetables.

Donation Timing:

- **Whole Produce:** Whole, uncut, unpeeled fruits and vegetables can be donated **at any time**, as long as they are **not spoiled**.
- **Cut or Processed Produce:** Cut, peeled, or otherwise processed fruits and vegetables should be donated **on or before the best by date** to ensure **freshness** and kept **refrigerated** until pickup.

Cosmetic Flaws:

- Produce with **minor cosmetic flaws** (e.g., bruising, small blemishes) is acceptable, as long as it is **not moldy, spoiled**, or has an **off smell**.

Storage/Temperature Control:

- **Whole produce** should be stored in a **cool, dry place**.
- **Cut produce** must be **refrigerated** until pickup to maintain freshness.

Packaging and Handling:

- Produce should be **properly packaged** in **clean, unused cardboard boxes** (e.g., banana boxes) to maintain freshness and prevent damage.
- **Do not mix** produce with **trash, compost, or waste materials**—this is considered **donation dumping** and is **not acceptable**.
- Ensure produce is **clean** and **free from contaminants** before donation.

Note: If produce shows **visible spoilage** or **signs of mold**, it should **not** be donated.

Fresh Meat & Seafood

Includes raw meat, poultry, and seafood.

Donation Timing:

- Fresh meat and seafood should be donated **on or before the best by date** for optimal freshness and safety.

Storage/Temperature Control:

- Must be stored at or below **41°F** at all times.
- Keep meat and seafood in separate containers from other food to prevent cross-contamination.

Packaging Integrity:

- Items must remain in their **original, intact packaging**.
- Vacuum-packed meat products must also be kept at or below **41°F**.

Note: Do not donate meat or seafood if it shows signs of spoilage, such as an off smell, discoloration, or mold.

Bakery Items

Includes pre-packaged and bulk baked goods.

Donation Timing:

- **Pre-Packaged Baked Goods:** These can be donated **on or before the "best by" date** for optimal freshness and quality.
 - We can still accept **pre-packaged baked goods** and **bread 1-2 days after the "best by" date**, as long as the packaging is **intact**, the product is still fresh, and there are **no signs of spoilage** (e.g., mold, staleness, off smells).
- **Bulk, Loose Baked Goods:** Loose baked goods, such as pastries, cakes, or bread, are acceptable as long as they were **not previously served to customers** and are in **good condition** (e.g., not stale, broken, or visibly spoiled).
- **Note:** To ensure the best quality and safety, prioritize donating bakery items on or before the best by date.

Filled Pastries (e.g., cream or meat-filled):

- These must be **refrigerated at or below 41°F** until pickup to maintain food safety. Ensure they are stored in containers that keep them cool and safe until donation.

Cosmetic Quality:

- Minor cosmetic flaws (e.g., slightly over-baked or imperfectly shaped pastries) are acceptable as long as the items are **safe to eat** and have not spoiled.

- **Do not donate** bread or baked goods that show signs of **visible spoilage**, such as **mold**, off smells, or excessive dryness.

Packaging Integrity:

- **Pre-Packaged Bakery Items:** Must remain in their **original, sealed packaging**. Donors should check that the packaging is not torn, punctured, or compromised in any way.
 - **Loose Bakery Items:** If bakery items are not in their original packaging, they must be securely wrapped in food-grade, resealable containers or plastic wrap to maintain freshness and prevent contamination.
 - **Tip:** If the original packaging is unavailable, it's important to wrap the items tightly to protect them from exposure to air, which can reduce freshness.
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Frozen Foods

Includes frozen meals, meats, vegetables, and other frozen products.

Donation Timing:

- **Frozen Foods:** Commercially packaged frozen foods should be donated **as soon as possible** after being stored at the correct temperature to ensure quality and safety.
- **Note: Frozen foods can be donated after the "best by" date**, but ideally should be donated **within 1-3 months** after the date for best **quality**. They remain **safe to eat indefinitely** as long as they have been stored at or below **32°F** and show no signs of spoilage.
- If frozen foods are donated **more than 3 months** past their best by date, they may still be safe, but the **quality may be compromised** (e.g., freezer burn, loss of texture and flavor). Always check the condition before donating.

Storage/Temperature Control:

- Frozen foods must be kept at or below **32°F** at all times until pickup.
- If frozen food has been stored improperly or thawed, it may not be safe to donate.

Defrosted Items:

- If a frozen item has **thawed**, it cannot be donated unless it has been **properly refrozen** according to safety guidelines.
- Refrozen items must have been kept at or below **41°F** during the thawing and refreezing process, and refrozen within **48 hours**.

Cosmetic Quality:

- Minor freezer burn or slight discoloration does not make the food unsafe, but may affect its quality.
- **Do not donate** foods with **extensive freezer burn, off smells, or visible spoilage**.

Packaging Integrity:

- Frozen foods must remain in their **original, intact packaging**. Do not donate items with **damaged or compromised packaging** (e.g., torn bags or broken seals).
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Bulk Foods

Includes items like grains, dried beans, pasta, flour, sugar, nuts, and other foods packaged in large quantities.

Donation Timing:

- **Prioritize donating on or before the best by date** for optimal quality.
- Bulk foods can be donated **up to 1-2 weeks after the best by date** for most non-perishable items, but **donating as soon as possible** is always encouraged.
- **Note:** If donating after the best by date, ensure the food shows no signs of spoilage (e.g., moisture, mold, off smells).
 - **Example:** A bag of rice with a best by date of June 1st could still be donated until June 15th if stored properly, but it's best to donate it before the 1st.

Repackaging Requirements (if applicable):

- Bulk items must be repackaged in a **licensed facility** into smaller portions.
 - **Example:** A 50 lbs bag of flour must be divided into smaller 5 lbs or 10 lbs portions, each repackaged and labeled accordingly.
- Label the new portions with:
 - Food item (including brand name)
 - Ingredients in descending order
 - Date of repack
 - Distributor name (e.g., grocery store name)
 - **Example:** A repackage of pasta might be labeled "Pasta – 10 lb. bag, Brand X, Ingredients: Durum Wheat Semolina, Date of Repack: May 20, 2025, Distributor: Grocery Store Name."

Non-Licensed Facilities:

- If not repackaged in a licensed facility, the food must remain in its **original, intact packaging**.
 - **Example:** If you have a bulk bag of dried beans from a grocery store but do not have a licensed facility to repackage it, the beans must be donated in their original, unopened packaging.

Self-Serve Bulk Bins:

- Foods from **self-serve bulk bins** cannot be donated.

Quality Check:

- Inspect for signs of **spoilage** such as moisture, mold, or off smells.
 - Do not donate items with compromised packaging or visible spoilage.
 - **Example:** A plastic bag of sugar that is torn or leaking should **not** be donated, as it can no longer be safely packaged or stored.
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Animal Feed/Pet Food

Includes dry, canned, and refrigerated pet food, as well as animal feed.

Donation Timing:

- For **best quality and safety**, please try to donate pet food **on or before the "best by" date**.
- **Dry Pet Food:** Can be donated up to **1-2 weeks** after the "best by" date, as long as the packaging is sealed and intact with no signs of spoilage.
- **Canned Pet Food:** Can be donated **up to 1-2 months** after the "best by" date, as long as the can is **undamaged**, with an **intact seal**, and shows no signs of spoilage (e.g., rust, bulges, off smells). Minor dents are acceptable if the seal is secure.
- **Refrigerated Pet Food:** Must be donated on or before the "use by" date and kept refrigerated until pickup.

Cosmetic Quality:

- Minor imperfections (e.g., slight dents in cans) are acceptable if the product is safe and undamaged.
- **Do not donate pet food** with visible spoilage (e.g., mold, off smells).

Packaging Integrity:

- **Dry and Canned Pet Food:** Must be in its original, sealed packaging without tears or damage.
 - **Refrigerated Pet Food:** Must remain in its original packaging and kept refrigerated until pickup.
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Expiration/Best-By Dates

Understanding Food Dates:

- **“Use by,” “Best by,” and “Sell by”** dates are **indicators of quality**, not safety. These dates are intended to reflect the **optimal freshness** and **flavor** of the product, rather than a definitive safety deadline.
- For most foods, the **expiration date** represents the point at which the manufacturer guarantees peak quality, but not necessarily the date when the product becomes unsafe to eat.

Safety After the Date:

- **Many foods are still safe to donate** after their labeled date, as long as they have been stored correctly and show no signs of spoilage.
- While the **quality** of the product may decline over time (e.g., texture, flavor, or appearance), the product is generally **safe to consume** if it has been **properly stored** and remains **sealed**.

Exceptions:

- Some food items—especially those that are perishable or require refrigeration—may become unsafe after their labeled date, even if they appear to be in good condition. Always check for signs of spoilage such as mold, foul odor, or significant changes in texture or color before donating.
- For items like baby food, infant formula, or medically prescribed foods, it's crucial to adhere to the labeled date, as their safety is more critical.

Donation Best Practices:

- When donating food close to or past the best-by date, ensure it has been properly stored (e.g., refrigerated, frozen, or kept in a cool dry place) and is still in its original, intact packaging.
 - If a food item is past its labeled date but still in good condition, it may still be accepted, but it is recommended to donate such items as soon as possible to maintain their freshness and quality.
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Foods That Cannot Be Donated

To ensure food safety, the following items **cannot** be accepted:

Foods Showing Signs of Spoilage:

- Foods with **mold, leaking packaging**, or an **unpleasant, foul odor**. These are clear indicators of contamination and can pose serious health risks.

Temperature-Abused Foods:

- Prepared foods that have been left **out of temperature control for more than 2 hours**. Foods stored outside the safe temperature range (below 41°F or above 135°F) can harbor harmful bacteria and should not be donated.

Damaged or Compromised Packaging:

- **Cans with bulging, rust, or severe dents**, especially around the rims, as these could indicate potential contamination.
- **Opened containers** (e.g., partially used jars, opened bags) are not acceptable, as once the packaging is compromised, safety cannot be guaranteed.

Contaminated Foods:

- Foods exposed to **contamination** (e.g., from **fire, flooding**, or other environmental hazards) should not be donated, as they may be unsafe for consumption.

Self-Serve Foods:

- **Self-serve foods** from **salad bars, buffets, or bakery displays** are not acceptable due to the potential for contamination from multiple sources.

Homemade Foods:

- These foods cannot be donated because they lack the proper labeling or safety information required to ensure their safety.

Baby Food Past Its Best-By Date:

- **Baby food** past its **"best by" date** should not be donated, as it could pose a health risk to infants, who are more vulnerable to foodborne illness.

Food Donor Safety Information

Thanks to the **Good Samaritan Acts** across the U.S. and California, businesses are **protected from liability** when donating food.

The **Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act** (1996) is a federal law that protects food donors from civil and criminal liability when donating “**apparently wholesome**” food. This includes “**any raw, cooked, processed, or prepared edible substance, ice, beverage, or ingredient used or intended for use in whole or in part for human consumption,**” as long as the donation is made **in good faith**.

Good faith means the donor has no knowledge that the food is unsafe, adulterated, or unfit for consumption. It also means the donor is acting without intent to deceive, mislead, or cause harm. In essence, the law encourages businesses to donate surplus food, provided they’re genuinely trying to help—rather than attempting to offload food that is unsafe or misrepresented.

California’s **Good Samaritan Act of 2017** further strengthens these protections, clarifying that food donations are covered even if they are past their labeled shelf life, as long as the food is still safe for consumption.

- **Federal Liability Protection:** [Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act](#)
- **State Liability Protection:** [California Good Samaritan Act](#)

For more information on federal food donation protections, visit [[USDA Food Loss and Waste](#)].

Contact Us

If you have any questions or need clarification, feel free to reach out!

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