

March Is National Nutrition Month

We're all trying to make our food budgets last a bit longer, without falling back on processed foods that are only less expensive in the short run while raising your risk of disease.

It's easier said than done, but we've collected some simple tips for this National Nutrition Month that can help you improve your health as well as your bottom line.

Iowa State University's "Spend Smart Eat Smart" website, at spendsmart.extension.iastate.edu, is packed with great ideas:

It starts with a plan. Set yourself up for success by planning meals and snacks in a way that works for you, your family, your budget and your schedule.

At the grocery store

First things first: make sure anything you're buying that's refrigerated is actually cold, or you could be in for a rude surprise when you get home with your groceries.

Make the dairy aisle one of the last stops in your shopping trip so the items do not become warm in the cart.

Refrigerate all dairy products within two hours of purchase.

Store milk in the refrigerator's main compartment; it is colder than the door.

Refrigerate all cheeses in their original packaging

until opened.

Wrap cheese tightly after use to prevent mold from growing.

Store dairy products for only the recommended amount of time — use the date on the package as a guide.

Milk generally stays fresh for one week after opening if it is kept refrigerated at 40°F or lower and the container is closed.

Fruit

In the store, look at any packaged fruit from the bottom, with an eye on any damaged or moldy items that can hide down there.

Once home, use fresh items first; have an immediate plan for using fresh berries and cherries which can spoil quickly.

Rinse fruit under clean, running water and drain.

Do not rinse berries or cherries until ready to use.

Most fruit will keep a week when refrigerated, but quality declines over time.

Vegetables

Store vegetables and fruits in separate drawers in the refrigerator to protect them from bruising and to help control moisture. In general, fruits like low humidity and vegetables like high humidity.

Keep an eye on your veggies throughout the week so you can use them before they lose their quality.

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845-486-2555 • toll free 866-486-2555 • dutchessny.gov/aging

To use up veggies, add them to soup or stir fry. You can also roast or steam them to serve at your next meal.

If you can't finish all of your cooked veggies, they can be frozen in an air tight container.

Create a ready-for-soup container. Label a freezer bag and add chopped broccoli stems, cauliflower core, leftover onion, green pepper, mushrooms, or cooked vegetables as available. Add them to canned, frozen, or homemade soup.

Proteins/Meat

Fresh meat and eggs should be stored in the refrigerator.

Eggs will keep in the refrigerator for three weeks after their sell by date.

When storing fresh meat in your refrigerator, put it on the lowest shelf on a plate. This way if it leaks, juices will not contaminate other foods.

It is safe to freeze meat or poultry directly in its supermarket wrapping, but this type of wrap allows air to get in. Unless you will be using the food in a month or two, wrap these packages for long term storage using any of the following: plastic freezer bag, heavy-duty foil, plastic freezer wrap, or freezer paper.

Grains

Store bread you will use soon in an airtight container at room temperature. Freeze the rest in airtight freezer packaging and use within six months.

Storing bread in the refrigerator can cause it to dry out.

Use nearly-stale bread for French toast, stuffing, bread crumbs, or croutons.

Whole grain products like whole wheat pasta and brown rice can be stored in the cupboard at room temperature.

Whole wheat flour is best kept in the freezer as it can go rancid if it is stored at room temperature for too long.

Choose products with whole grain listed as the first in the ingredient: Whole wheat, whole rye, whole grain corn, whole oats, graham flour, oatmeal, brown rice, bulgur, wild rice.

Don't be fooled by color. Caramel coloring may be added to give some bread products the appearance of being whole grain.

Read the Nutrition Facts Label. Whole grain products generally have at least three grams of fiber per serving.

In General

Store food appropriately and keep perishable products at a safe temperature. Keep your refrigerator at around 37° F but not below freezing. Freezers should be set at around 0° F.

Check the dates on foods when you're shopping. If you purchase meat or other perishables with a short use by date, plan to cook or freeze them quickly.

Keeping your refrigerator and cupboards organized will help you prevent waste. You'll be more aware of what is in it and what needs to get used quickly.

Arrange supplies so the oldest items are in front so you will see and use them first.

Use see-through storage containers for leftovers. Label, date, and freeze them in meal-size servings.

Always check your leftover supply when meal planning so you can work them into your plan.