



In a pickle? Here's how to tell if home-preserved food is actually safe to eat



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY](#)

As we “shelter at home” and go through our stored food, I want to know if I can safely serve a jar of homemade pickles preserved in 2012? When should I throw food out? Craig R., Atascadero, CA

By Carol Michael, UCCE Master Food Preserver

That's a great question! According to University of Georgia Cooperative Extension, storage life for home canned pickles is 1 year. Practicing proper hygiene, good food safety techniques, and using research tested recipes will help prevent spoilage and foodborne illness in home preserved foods.

Sight is usually the best way to tell if your pickles have gone bad. If the top of the lid on the jar is rounded and dome shaped instead of flat across, you don't hear the normal pop when you open the jar, or if anything is brown or black (besides the added spices) your pickles are unsafe to eat. This is true of any home preserved food no matter the age.

When should food be thrown out? It's happened to all of us: you're looking for something in the freezer or pantry and discover food that has been forgotten. Is it still good? Chances are it is!

The length of time food is frozen does not affect its safety. Food can be kept frozen indefinitely. Food stored in the freezer for months (see [recommended freezer times chart](#)) may be dry or not

taste as good, but it should be safe to eat. So, if you find a package of ground beef that has been in the freezer more than a few months, don't throw it out. Use it to make chili or tacos. The seasonings and additional ingredients can make up for loss of flavor and moisture.

What about the foods in your pantry? Most shelf-stable foods are safe for quite a while. In fact, commercially canned food will last for years, if the can itself is in good condition (no rust, dents, or swelling). Packaged foods (cereal, pasta, cookies) will be safe past the 'best by' date, although they may eventually become stale or develop off flavors. You'll know when you open the package if the food has lost quality. Most dated food refers to quality, not safety. Before you throw out food from your pantry or freezer, check it out. It may be just fine!

The following resources may help decide how long to keep foods in your home:

USDA's [Shelf Stable Food Safety Fact Sheet](#)

University of Georgia Cooperative Extension's [Food Storage for Safety and Quality](#) chart

Authors: Michael, C., Ravalin, D., Soule, K.E. (May 2020)

Published by The Tribune on Wednesday May 13, 2020 page 1C. It is the policy of the University of California (UC) and the UC Division of Agriculture & Natural Resources not to engage in discrimination against or harassment of any person in any of its programs or activities (Complete nondiscrimination policy statement can be found at <http://ucanr.edu/sites/anrstaff/files/215244.pdf>) Inquiries regarding ANR's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to John I. Sims, Affirmative Action Compliance Officer/Title IX Officer, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2801 Second Street, Davis, CA 95618, (530) 750-1397.