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REACTIONS

Good food gone bad

What's OK, what needs to go?

Every year, roughly 40% of the food in America goes uneaten. Most of this food, however, is actually still OK to eat. So, how can you tell whether those leftovers are lunch or trash?

Brown Produce

Brown and bruised produce may look unappealing, but it's just nature's chemistry at play, and is probably OK to eat. Fruit softens when it ripens because enzymes within the fruit break down starch and the rigid walls of plant cells into simple sugars. The brown color of cut fruit comes from oxidation of polyphenols—common molecules in plants—which produces brown pigments. If you see slime or mold, though—toss it!

MOLDY FOOD

Some cheeses (like Gorgonzola or Brie) are supposed to have mold growth. Most other things should not—some molds can produce harmful compounds called mycotoxins. Molds' thread-like roots can penetrate into bread, fruits and other soft or porous foods. Unless it's a dense food (think hard cheeses), don't try to cut away the bad part, just throw it away.

EXPIRATION DATES

Expiration dates on shelf-stable foods are a big source of confusion. In fact, they don't have anything to do with food safety—they let retailers know when the food is at its peak quality. If food is stored properly, and the container is undamaged, shelf-stable foods can be good long after their expiration dates.

In the end, one of the best ways to tell if something is OK to eat is to use your senses: If it looks or smells funny, don't eat or drink it.

* What's happening in spoiled milk?

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American Chemical Society

1155 Sixteenth Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20036 T [202] 872-6042 F [202] 872 4370 www.acs.org