

Food Pantry Safety: Receive, Store, Distribute

Fast decisions for protecting donated and USDA foods. When a condition is uncertain: stop, separate the item, label it DO NOT DISTRIBUTE, and ask the pantry manager.

41°F or below Cold TCS food	45°F air or below Raw shell eggs	135°F or above Hot TCS food	Frozen solid No thaw/refreeze signs
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TCS = time/temperature control for safety food. Use a clean, calibrated probe thermometer and follow product-specific or local rules when they are stricter. [1, 8]

1. Receiving decision chart

CHECK	ACCEPT	QUARANTINE OR REJECT	RECORD / ACTION
Source	Known, approved donor, food bank, distributor, retailer, or other lawful source.	Unknown source; evidence of tampering; unlabeled repackaged food; food prepared in an unapproved setting unless specifically permitted by state/local law.	Record donor/source and delivery date. Apply pantry, food-bank, TEFAP, and local rules. [1, 8]
Cold TCS food	Product temperature 41°F or below; raw shell eggs received in equipment with air at 45°F or below.	Above limit, unless a specific law allows another receiving temperature; any evidence of temperature abuse.	Measure between packages or with a sanitized probe. Record temperature and time. [1, 8]
Frozen food	Frozen solid; package dry and intact; no large ice crystals or staining.	Soft or thawed; liquid stains; large ice crystals; distorted package suggesting thawing and refreezing.	Record temperature/condition. Move promptly to freezer. [2]
Hot prepared food	135°F or above, protected from contamination, from an approved source.	Below 135°F without an approved time-control plan or verified corrective action.	Record temperature and time. Maintain 135°F or above. [1, 8]
Cans, jars, boxes, pouches	Original label present; seal intact; clean and dry; package not opened or repaired.	Bulging, leaking, punctured, badly dented, seam-dented, heavily rusted at seams, torn, open, water-stained, pest-damaged, or resealed.	Place rejected items in a marked area away from distributable food. [2]
Labels & allergens	Identity and ingredients/allergen information are readable; lot/date codes remain visible.	Missing identity label; ingredients/allergen information missing where required; label appears altered.	Never guess ingredients. Keep original packaging with the food. [6]
Infant formula	Sealed, intact, authentic package; lot code readable; before the manufacturer Use By date.	Past Use By date; damaged seal; mismatched case/container codes; altered label; signs of tampering.	Do not distribute formula after its Use By date. [7]

DATE LABELS: Best If Used By, Sell By, and most Use By dates generally describe quality, not safety. Evaluate package integrity, storage history, and food condition under pantry policy. **Infant formula is the exception:** never distribute it after the Use By date. [7]

2. Safe storage and distribution

ZONE	CONTROL	VERIFY EACH SHIFT / DELIVERY DAY
Refrigerator	Hold TCS food at 41°F or below. Place raw animal foods below and away from ready-to-eat food. Prevent drips and cross-contamination.	Read and record the unit thermometer. Check food temperature if the unit is warm, overloaded, or left open. [1]
Freezer	Keep food frozen; a 0°F target supports quality and emergency planning. Do not overfill; allow cold-air circulation.	Record unit temperature. Check for soft packages, liquid stains, or large ice crystals. [2, 9]
Dry storage	Keep food clean, dry, covered, and protected from pests. Store at least 6 inches above the floor; never under leaking pipes or beside chemicals.	Inspect for moisture, pests, droppings, damaged packages, and chemical contamination. [1]
Inventory	Use first-in, first-out or first-expire, first-out. Keep lot codes and labels visible. Separate allergen-sensitive items when practical.	Check oldest stock first. Track donor/source, receipt date, quantity, lot/date codes, and disposition when required. [3, 6]
Distribution	Protect food from splash, dust, handling, and weather. Use coolers or refrigerated vehicles for cold foods. Minimize time out of temperature control.	Confirm cold/hot temperatures at setup and periodically. Give households cold-storage and cooking instructions. [1]

3. People, cleaning, and allergen controls

Keep illness away from food Exclude volunteers or staff who are vomiting or have diarrhea from food handling. For norovirus, CDC says wait at least 48 hours after symptoms stop before handling food. Report illness to the manager. [5]	Wash hands Use soap and running water for at least 20 seconds before food work and after restroom use, touching raw food, eating, coughing, cleaning, or handling trash. Hand sanitizer is not a substitute for handwashing against norovirus. [5]	Clean, then sanitize Remove food and soil, wash with detergent, rinse, then use an approved sanitizer at label concentration and contact time. Keep chemicals labeled and away from food. [1]	Protect allergen information Keep ingredient labels attached. Never substitute, repack, or combine foods without accurate labeling. Nine major allergens: milk, egg, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, soybeans, sesame. [6]
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4. Recall or safety incident: stop distribution

1 IDENTIFY Match product name, size, UPC, lot/date codes, and distribution area to the notice.	2 ISOLATE Stop distribution. Separate affected food and mark DO NOT DISTRIBUTE .	3 DOCUMENT Count product; record locations, disposition, and any prior distribution. Preserve labels and records.	4 NOTIFY & FOLLOW Contact the pantry manager, supplier/food bank, and program authority. Follow the recall notice exactly.
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Do not donate, redistribute, or discard recalled food until the notice or responsible authority directs the action. Clean and sanitize affected areas when instructed. [4]

POWER OUTAGE: Keep doors closed. A closed refrigerator generally keeps food safe for about 4 hours. Move TCS food to verified cold storage or ice-filled coolers if the outage will be longer. When power returns, evaluate each item using actual time and temperature; never taste food to test safety. [9]

Primary sources

Official government sources. Reviewed August 14, 2026. The FDA Food Code is a model code, not federal law; follow your jurisdiction, food bank, donor, and program requirements.

1. U.S. FDA, [Food Code 2022](https://www.fda.gov/food/fda-food-code/food-code-2022): https://www.fda.gov/food/fda-food-code/food-code-2022

3. USDA FNS, [TEFAP Inventory Levels and Management \(FD-128\)](https://www.fns.usda.gov/tefap/determining-inventory-levels-usda-foods-use-tefap-and-inventory-reporting-requirements): https://www.fns.usda.gov/tefap/determining-inventory-levels-usda-foods-use-tefap-and-inventory-reporting-requirements

5. U.S. CDC, [How to Prevent Norovirus](https://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/prevention/index.html): https://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/prevention/index.html

7. U.S. FDA, [Handling Infant Formula Safely](https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/handling-infant-formula-safely-what-you-need-know): https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/handling-infant-formula-safely-what-you-need-know

9. USDA FSIS, [Keep Your Food Safe During Emergencies](https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/emergencies/keep-your-food-safe-during-emergencies): https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/emergencies/keep-your-food-safe-during-emergencies

2. U.S. FDA, [Surplus, Salvaged, and Donated Foods](https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/surplus-salvaged-and-donated-foods): https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/surplus-salvaged-and-donated-foods

4. USDA FNS, [Responding to Food Recall Procedures for USDA Foods](https://www.fns.usda.gov/fs/responding-food-recall-procedures-usda-foods): https://www.fns.usda.gov/fs/responding-food-recall-procedures-usda-foods

6. U.S. FDA, [Sesame Is the Ninth Major Food Allergen](https://www.fda.gov/food/food-allergies/faster-act-sesame-ninth-major-food-allergen): https://www.fda.gov/food/food-allergies/faster-act-sesame-ninth-major-food-allergen

8. Virginia Administrative Code, [Food receipt temperatures and food donation](https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincodefull/title02/agency5/chapter585/partIII/article2/): https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincodefull/title02/agency5/chapter585/partIII/article2/

Food Pantry Safety Operations Chart | U.S. best-practice guide

Page 2 of 2