



Everything You Wanted to Know About Canned Food

For hundreds of years, the metal food can has helped bring food safely to our tables. We see it on shelves in grocery stores everywhere, but did you ever wonder when and how it came to be? We answer that and several other common questions people have about cans and canned foods.

Q. When was canned food invented?

A. In 1795, Napoleon offered a prize to anyone coming up with a way to preserve food for his armies, and a man named Nicholas Appert figured out how to seal foods in airtight glass containers. Shortly thereafter, English entrepreneurs developed a way to use tin cans instead of glass, an innovation that resulted in the first American canning factory by 1812. Unfortunately the first can openers weren't patented until the 1850s (soldiers opened early meat tins with their bayonets!) and the familiar rotating wheel can openers we know today weren't introduced until 1925.



Q. How long does canned food last?

A. Canned food lasts at least two years from the time it was processed. Food more than two years old in an intact can is still safe to eat, but color and texture may change with longer storage. That's why you won't find an expiration date on most cans, but you may find a "best used by" date. You may also find a code telling when the food was canned, but you'll need to contact the manufacturer to ask how to decipher the code.

Q. Is it safe to eat food from dented cans?

A. Dents are not a problem as long as the can is still intact. If a dent is extremely sharp or is located on a can seam, however, it can potentially create a tiny hole in the can, through which dangerous bacteria can enter. So don't worry about small dents, but skip any can that shows any leakage or bulging. If food spurts from the can when you open it, it's also a sign that unsafe leakage has occurred. Such events are extremely rare; today's sturdy cans have an enviable food safety record!

Q. What does "vacuum packed" mean?

A. Cans labeled vacuum packed use less water and packaging, fitting the same amount of food in a smaller space. This technology, pioneered in 1929, is often used for canned corn.

Q. Does rinsing canned food really cut the sodium a lot?

A. Research from the University of Tennessee shows that draining canned beans cuts sodium by 36%; rinsing takes this decrease to about 41%. If you're cutting sodium in your diet, make sure to drain and rinse beans and other vegetables—or simply look for the many "low sodium" or "no added sodium" canned foods now available.

Q. Can I refrigerate leftover food right in the can?

A. It's better to put it in a covered bowl or leftover container. Food left in open cans can develop off flavors and will dry out.