



Tips For Foods In Your Kits

This year has taught us so much about the importance of preparing for the unexpected as well as the disaster we are expecting. People are looking more seriously at exactly what they are adding to their kits, especially foods. Now we recognize the importance of food in our kits as we have seen people in shelters with little food. We have heard stories of evacuees spending hours stuck in traffic as they attempt to escape. It is not unusual to hear of families taking 4-5 hours to make a trip that normally takes just a half hour or a little more.

Having spoken with many survivors and those who have volunteered helping survivors, I have come to understand many are storing the wrong foods in their kits. There are a few criteria to follow when considering what foods you will add to sustain yourself and your family.

First: Foods should be light weight. A great five-day kit will be heavy. You do not want to add extra weight to your pack which may make carrying a more difficult task. Only foods in single serving size containers should be added to a kit, nothing larger. This is especially important if you are considering adding canned foods. Remember these foods are for consumption not only when you get to a shelter or hotel but as you sit for hours in a car evacuating or camped out in a parking lot waiting for a place to stay sheltered.

Second: Foods should have a long shelf life. We all procrastinate checking and rotating the items in our kits. It is not at all uncommon to get motivated to examine our kits only to discover our children, and yes, even we have grown a little since we added our clothing. How many of us have tossed the food in our kits because we no longer deemed it safe even for our pets?

Third: Foods should be high in calories. Yes, this is the place to ignore high calorie counts. During stressful times our bodies need more calories to keep up with the emotional and physical demands we are facing. Be sure to add at least 1,200 calories per day for children and women and 1,600 for teenage boys and men. More is even better.

Fourth: Foods should be grab and go, no preparation. Meals need to be ready to eat without cooking and without adding water. I know this is controversial but never add freeze dried or dehydrated food to your kits. During and following an emergency you can count on two things the majority of the time, no power and little, if any, water. Do not waste precious water reconstituting instant oatmeal, Ramen noodles, freeze dried, or dehydrated foods. Eating foods that have not been reconstituted may cause dehydration. Don't risk that, it can be life threatening.

Fifth: Will your family eat the food? Years ago, I was teaching a class on kits in my daughter's home. I had survival bars broken into small pieces in dishes on a table. I loved this brand of emergency bar and wanted to expose others to it. While I was teaching, my grandchildren crawled under the table, reached up and "sampled" the samples. We all laughed as we watched little hands appear and then disappear back under the table. They loved those bars and just couldn't resist. If you are purchasing emergency bars designed to last for years purchase one of each variety and test them on your family before purchasing many.

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Sixth: Consider comfort foods. Are there foods your family loves? You can, for example, store everything needed for PB&J sandwiches. Bread, desserts and crackers may be purchased as MREs and will last years in this form.

Seventh: Salty foods must be avoided. These foods will only cause thirst and when water is limited this is a huge problem. Do not add chips, salted nuts or jerky to kits for this reason.

What should you store in your packs?

Canned meats are a good protein choice. Vienna sausage and deviled ham both come in small manageable cans with a pop top. When storing any food in a pop top can place a couple strips of duct tape or painters' tape over the top of the can so it cannot accidentally snag on something in your pack and open.

Chicken and tuna are both available in vacuum sealed pouches and are ready to eat making them a good choice.

Peanut butter. You may choose to store individual serving size packaged with crackers. Still another option is pouched peanut butter which is available from sources selling MREs. These pouches will last years.

Jelly or jam. What is peanut butter without jelly? Purchase individual packets such as those you get at a restaurant to keep storing light weight and small. They can be purchased at restaurant supply stores such as Smart and Final. There are many in a box so purchase as a group and share.

Nuts and trail mix. Do not store salted nuts as they will increase thirst. If storing trail mix add a few M&Ms as they will satisfy the craving for sweets encouraging consumption of protein in the form of the nuts.

Protein bars. Bars with chocolate chips are a better option than chocolate coated bars as the coating will melt. Melted chocolate is yummy but messy.

Powdered drink mixes. Water can become boring for kids, and adults, after a few days. Individual packets of lemonade or another flavor may be added to bottled water to provide variety.

Dried fruit. Never store dehydrated or freeze dried fruit, as we discussed before, eating without reconstituting may cause dehydration. Dried fruits are fine as they still contain water.

Fruit leather. Spend a little more and get the 100% fruit variety.

Squeeze packets of apple sauce and other fruits. There are many varieties loved by kids and adults alike.

Canned fruit. Some fruits come in individual serving sizes but do not store fruit cups as they can leak. Don't forget to pack a can opener or purchase pop top cans.

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Breakfast bars and granola bars. Rotate at least yearly.

Pop Tarts. These do not need to be toasted to be edible and kids love them.

Crackers. Check expiration dates and rotate often. Stale crackers are not fun to eat. Consider crackers pre spread with peanut butter or cheese if the kids like those but understand these provide calories but very little protein.

Processed cheese spread. Remember this is about calories not nutrition.

Waxed cheese. These will last a long time on the shelf.

Boxed juices and/or milk/chocolate milk/soy milk/almond milk, etc. These last for years and provide variety. Dehydration is a big problem following a disaster. Remember liquids are heavy. You may want to keep these drinks in a plastic box in the cupboard where it is easy to grab as you evacuate. Rotate in school lunches or when taking a long road trip.

Dry cereal. Purchase the cereal in individual boxes but only if you have stored milk. These individual serving size boxes are designed to also act as a bowl. Remember the spoons if you are planning to store these.

Hot cocoa. If it is cold during your emergency a warm drink will be welcome and cocoa is a perfect comfort food. You may not have access to a way to heat water for these so store sparingly.

Snacks: Mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and before bedtime snacks, plan for them. You will all be bored just sitting around or standing in line and waiting so of course you will think about and crave a snack.

Consider: Yogurt covered raisins or pretzels, individual packages of cookies, candy bars, hard candies and lollipops. Hard candies and lollipops will last forever and quench your thirst when water is limited.

Gum and mints. Do not store anything mint flavored or all your foods will taste like mint.

All of the above are easy to purchase at your local store or restaurant supply. Also available are foods specifically designed for survival and long term storage. You may also want to consider storing some of the following foods.

MREs. Meals ready to eat used to be foods we all wrinkled our nose at the thought of eating. They have come a long way. As with all foods you store purchase one of each variety you are considering and let all family members sample them. There are main courses, desserts, bread, tortillas, peanut butter, and even sandwiches available. MREs are designed to last for at least five years but they last much longer. They do not need water added and can be eaten cold or warm. MRE warmers are available, light weight and flat to store. Pouched foods meant for camping are not appropriate for kits because they need water added.

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Emergency bars. These are designed to take the place of an entire meal. Most bars are 400 calories each. As with MREs they will last five or more years. There are some that taste like and have the consistency of shortbread, others taste like cardboard. Again, buy one and try before buying several.

A few more tips.

Include plastic utensils for the foods you store. If you are planning on PB&J sandwiches or crackers be sure to have knives, spoons for cereal, forks or spoons for canned fruits.

To keep from eating all your food in the first two days place a days' worth of food in a resealable bag and label the bags, day one, day two, etc.

Choose a date to rotate food each year. Labor Day is a great time to do this. Take out your food, place it in a large storage container with a lid and keep it in a cupboard for use in school and work lunches. Need a snack for a movie night, use the foods in this container. Need food for a long car trip, use the foods in this container. Never waste foods again.

Keep snacks in adult kits for a surprise when times get boring or more stressful.

Purchase a variety of foods and drinks and involve all family members in choosing what they want to put in their kits. Lay food on a table and let each family member choose the foods they want in their kits. Lay them out in categories. For example: choose one of these fruits, one of these proteins and one bar or Pop Tart for breakfast. Do the same with lunch and dinner. This will ensure variety and also minimize whining later as they will have chosen for themselves. During a time of crisis, children need to feel safe. Children who help make decisions about their kits, especially the foods, feel safe and empowered.

Again, check out discount grocery stores, restaurant supply stores and dollar stores for some great deals on food for your kits. Begin today.