

The Refrigerator Has a Story to Tell (continued)

Expiration Dates Do Not Tell the Entire Story

A date printed on a package can be helpful, but food may become unsafe before that date if it was improperly stored. Food may also remain usable after certain quality dates.

Caregivers are not expected to become food-safety inspectors. Use reasonable judgment, follow instructions, and report questionable conditions rather than making broad decisions about the client's belongings.

A container with no label, an unknown preparation date, or an unusual odor should not automatically become part of the client's meal.

Leftovers Need Attention

Clients may save small portions because they dislike waste or expect to eat them later. Over time, the refrigerator can fill with containers whose contents and ages are uncertain.

When preparing or storing leftovers:

- Use clean containers.
- Cover food properly.
- Label or date it when required.
- Refrigerate it promptly.

- Follow any dietary or meal-preparation instructions.
- Never combine new food with older leftovers merely to save space.

If the client repeatedly refuses to discard visibly spoiled food, report the concern. Do not turn the issue into an argument.

An Empty Refrigerator Also Communicates

A refrigerator containing almost no usable food may indicate that the client lacks transportation, money, physical ability, memory, or assistance with shopping.

The caregiver should not immediately conclude that the client is being neglected. Instead, report the facts:

“The refrigerator contained milk, mustard, and one prepared meal. The client stated there was no additional food in the home.”

Specific observations are more helpful than conclusions.

Respect Preferences and Instructions

Food is personal. Culture, religion, habit, health conditions, allergies, and individual preferences may affect what a client eats.

Caregivers should not replace the client's choices with their own ideas about a proper meal. They should follow the care plan, prepare authorized foods, and offer reasonable choices when possible.

Do not introduce supplements, special diets, or unfamiliar ingredients without authorization.

Food Can Reveal a Changing Need

One spoiled container may be an oversight. A repeated pattern may signal a larger concern.

The client may be forgetting meals, losing the ability to prepare food safely, having trouble chewing, or avoiding eating because of nausea, pain, or difficulty swallowing. The caregiver should not diagnose the cause, but the pattern deserves reporting.

The refrigerator is not merely an appliance. It can provide important information about nutrition, safety, independence, and changing needs.

Open the door with respect—but also with attentive eyes.