

how long do things last?

Your A-to-Z guide to the shelf life of everyday essentials—plus how to get more out of them.

A LOE VERA GEL

12 MONTHS

Once the bottle is open, vitamins and minerals start to lose potency, and will do so even faster if exposed to air and sunlight, says Kristina Goldenberg, a dermatologist in New York City. Cap tightly and store in a closet. Even better, leave it in the fridge: It'll feel great spread on sun-parched skin.

B ULBS

10 TO 15 YEARS

Daffodils, certain tulips, crocus, Spanish and English bluebells, and grape hyacinths are likely to bloom annually as long as you fertilize in the fall and water well in the spring, says David Salman, founder and chief horticulturist of High Country Gardens, a mail-order company. Ditto for dahlias, gladiolus, and canna lilies, though their bulbs need to be dug up and stored before the first frost.



C AST-IRON PAN

GENERATIONS!

"Because cast iron is porous, water is its enemy, so avoid soaking the pan for an extended time and pat dry completely to avoid rust," says Kelly Peterson, a development specialist at Lodge Cast Iron. Let the pan cool to room temperature before cleaning; a sudden immersion in warm or cold water could cause cracks. For gentle cleaning, stick with warm water and a nonscratch nylon scrub brush.

D ELI MEAT

UP TO 5 DAYS

If turkey, ham, and roast beef don't come in a container or a zip-top bag, transfer them to one (and mark the expiration

date)—you want to lock out moisture that can speed up spoilage. Also, use that deli meat drawer in your fridge, says Archie Magoulas, a USDA food safety specialist: "It prevents a rush of warmer air every time the fridge gets opened."

E XTERIOR PAINT JOB

UP TO 10 YEARS

The key to an enduring paint job: wood that's well-prepped, says Steve Skodak, executive director of Painting and Decorating Contractors of America. That often involves power washing, scraping off old peeling paint, and sanding—so new paint best bonds to the surface. The quality of the paint also plays into longevity, as does the color; lighter hues tend to fare better than darker ones, since they're less vulnerable to sun fade. Painted brick and painted siding (vinyl and aluminum) require similar prep.





FERTILIZER

FOREVER

It's fine to store both the dry and liquid kinds in your garage or garden shed, say the Scotts Miracle-Gro people. For extra protection, seal bags with large chip clips. Should the fertilizer form clumps or crystals due to humidity, break them up with a trowel or shake away.

GUM

12 TO 18 MONTHS

The sweeteners eventually lose their flavor. Leave a pack in your car's console and the sticks could also be difficult to chew, says Brittany O'Gara, a development scientist at Mars Wrigley Confectionery: "Extreme heat or cold can dry out gum."



ICE POPS

UP TO 18 MONTHS

Store-bought ones are flash-frozen and contain preservatives (even organic pops have natural preservatives). So they'll taste fresh longer than homemade frozen treats, which cap at around three weeks, says Frances Largeman-Roth, R.D.N., author of *Eating in Color*. Place in the back of the freezer, where it's coldest.

JUG OF WATER

INDEFINITELY

Go on—sock a bunch away for doomsday. "Store jugs in a cool,

HOT WATER HEATER

UP TO 12 YEARS (TANK) UP TO 15 YEARS (TANKLESS)

Maintenance is key. During an annual heating system checkup, a plumber can flush out sediment from the heater and check the anode rod, which helps control corrosion. Tankless models may need a water deposit descaling. If the water pressure in your home is too high, that can also stress out a heater, so ask the pro to make sure your pressure meets local code, says Ed Del Grande, a master plumber in Smithfield, RI. (In most areas, it should be less than 80 psi—pounds per square inch.) If it's an issue, have a water-pressure-reducing valve installed.

dry area, like a basement," says Bob Hirst, a VP at the International Bottled Water Association. "Avoid placing near items with potent chemicals, like paint thinner—the scent could waft through the plastic and affect the taste."

KERATIN TREATMENT

UP TO 3 MONTHS

Don't wash your hair for at least 24 hours after the process so it can fully set in, says stylist Stephanie Johnson of Marie Robinson Salon in New York City. For the same reason, skip exercising the first day after to avoid perspiration. Use sulfate-free hair products to preserve that silky smoothness.



LAPTOP

3 TO 5 YEARS

As with any machine, parts wear out over time. Yet even if you replace the hard drive and battery, says Kan Liu, a Google senior director of product management, "you'll eventually need updated software, which typically requires a more powerful central processing unit—the brains of the computer—than an older laptop has." To keep yours at its speediest, delete unnecessary files. Occasionally blast the keyboard with compressed air so dust won't clog up the fans and cause them to overheat and conk out.

MATTRESS

UP TO 10 YEARS

Sagging, lumps, and regularly waking up with body aches are signs it's time for a new mattress, says Lexie Sachs, senior textiles product analyst at the Good Housekeeping Institute. Twice a year, rotate yours, and if there's no defined top or bottom, flip it.

NUT BUTTER

UP TO 6 MONTHS

Store jars you've opened in the fridge. "Oil separation is normal and doesn't signal spoilage," says Lisa L. Dean, Ph.D., a food scientist based in Raleigh, NC. You'll know it's gone bad if it starts to smell like oil paint.

OPEN BOTTLE OF WINE

3 TO 5 DAYS (RED)

4 TO 5 DAYS (WHITE)

Wine starts to turn once oxygen seeps in. "Whether you use a cork, cap, or bottle stopper, the most important thing is to make it tight," says Jen Walsh, winemaker for La Crema Winery in California's Sonoma County. (If you opt for a cork, insert the original end, as the flip side is drier and could flake.) Then refrigerate—red wine too!—since cool temps slow oxidation. FYI, red wine past its prime darkens and tastes vinegary; white tastes flat and watery.



PETROLEUM JELLY

8 YEARS

Eventually, the jelly can thin out. It might also be tainted. "If you've finger-dipped while sick with a cold or virus, you should throw out the whole jar," says cosmetic chemist Ron Robinson of beautystat.com. (This is a good reason to use cotton swabs.) Otherwise, even an antique-level jar never goes bad: "Because petroleum jelly doesn't contain water," says Robinson, "there's no risk of bacterial growth."

QUINOA

3 YEARS

Keep quinoa in cabinets that aren't right next to your range, says Geoff Stella, a VP at Ancient Harvest; moisture that spreads from cooking can make it sprout (it's a seed, not a grain). Once opened, transfer it to an airtight container or a zip-top bag.

RAZOR BLADES

UP TO 6 WEEKS

Figure one to two weeks for daily shaves and up to six weeks if you shave twice a week—beyond that, you risk razor burn and nicks from a dull blade, says Caitlin Orszulak, a products researcher at Procter & Gamble. Rinse off completely after using and stash in a drawer or cabinet; moisture in the shower can bring on rust.



SHOWER CURTAIN LINER

1 YEAR-PLUS

Fully close a vinyl or plastic liner after showering so mildew doesn't grow in the folds, says Carolyn Forte, textiles director of the Good Housekeeping Institute. To get rid of soap scum, machine wash on the gentle cycle in warm water, adding bleach if there's mold. Then hang back up to dry. You can also spot-treat with tub and tile cleaner, scrub with a brush, and rinse.

TOASTER OVEN

5 YEARS

That is, it'll last as long as you don't gunk up the heating elements—which can start a fire. "It's best to clean up spills and splatters after each use," says Ed Piotrowski, a repair expert at Mr. Appliance. Remove grease on the racks and tray with warm soapy water. Sponge down the interior as necessary with nonabrasive liquid cleanser, avoiding the heating parts.

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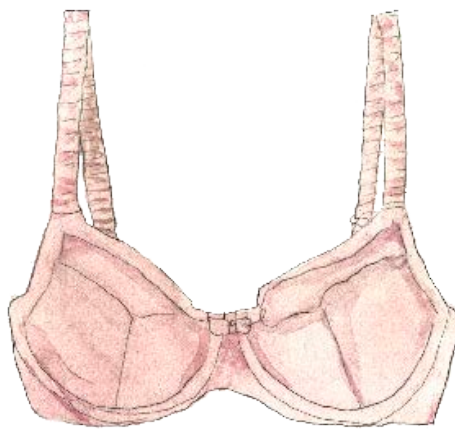


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UNDERWIRE BRA

1 TO 2 YEARS

Have a few in rotation, washing them every three to four wears. Before laundering (ideally, in cool water), fasten the hooks and place in a small mesh laundry bag. Then lay flat to dry so the band doesn't stretch out, says Orit Hashay, CEO of Brayola: The band is more key for support than the straps are.

VITAMINS

UP TO 3 YEARS

Keep bottles in a pantry or other cool, dark space; they shouldn't be left on a counter, as light can weaken their potency, says Brooke Alpert, a nutritionist based in New York City. Refrigerate fish oils, and toss expired bottles—there's no point in downing ineffective pills.

WOOD CUTTING BOARD

A LIFETIME

Clean after use with dishwashing liquid and warm water, dab with a towel, then let it air-dry, says Richard Gonzalez, a vice president at Core Home. Avoid the dishwasher,



as heat could cause cracks that can become breeding grounds for bacteria. If yours looks dry, replenish it with a thin layer of food-grade mineral oil or one made for cutting boards and let it sink in overnight.

X-ACTO KNIFE

2 TO 6 MONTHS

The knife itself should be around forever. As for the blades, their longevity depends on whether you're an avid crafter or an occasional user. Either way, avoid mixing materials: "If you mainly use a blade for paper cutting and then slice into cardboard or foam, it will wear down faster," says Kai Lewis, a spokesperson for Elmer's. Lost the cap? Stick your knife into a rubber eraser.

YOGA MAT

3-PLUS YEARS

Don't keep yours near a window or in your car's trunk, since heat and UV rays can make rubber break down, says Joanne Sessler, global VP at Manduka mats. Give an old one new life as a knee rest when gardening.

ZIT CREAM

6 TO 12 MONTHS

Because humidity from showering can degrade active ingredients, keep your tube in a linen closet or a nightstand instead of in a medicine cabinet. "Definitely mind the expiration date," says dermatologist Kristina Goldenberg, "as ingredients in a pimple cream, like benzoyl peroxide, can become unstable past their prime and possibly lead to skin irritation."

