

Food waste is a hot topic these days—and rightly so! The latest research shows that 50% of the produce in the United States is thrown away. Globally, one-third of all food is lost or wasted—an amount that would cover all of New York City, Jersey City, and Newark!¹ As nutrition professionals, we need to understand the issue of food waste so we can discuss it with others, recognize our role, and support efforts to reduce food waste.

The What

Food loss and waste plague the entire food supply chain—it is not just a problem created by individual consumers with our everyday habits. Instead, every step from farm-to-plate contributes to the problem, and it will require teamwork on all levels to make meaningful changes.

- *Food loss* refers to food that never makes it to the final product stage fit for consumption. This typically happens during production, post-harvest, processing, and distribution.
- *Food waste* refers to food that is meant for consumption, but that does not get consumed for whatever reason. It typically occurs at the retail and consumption stages of the food supply chain.

The Impacts

Food loss and waste have far-reaching impacts. For this reason addressing this problem was explicitly identified as part of goal #12 of the United Nation's 2015 [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

- Almost one billion people around the world live in hunger. In the U.S. alone, 48 million people are food insecure. Recovering half of what is wasted would eliminate hunger globally.²
- Food waste is a major contributor to landfills, where it produces methane, a greenhouse gas that contributes greatly to global warming.
- Millions of dollars and precious resources such as water and energy are lost each year when food is lost and wasted. In the U.S. this loss totals \$161 billion. In fact, Americans throw away \$1,600 worth of food each year!^{3,4}

Practical Ways To Reduce Food Waste

The evidence is clear that food loss and waste occur at all levels of production and consumption. We must address both our individual habits and the systematic areas that contribute to the problem. Here are a few ideas to get started:

- Learn to properly store your produce and preserve excess amounts before they spoil. Many preservation techniques take less time than we think. If you buy a huge bunch of spinach, but you know you can't eat it all before it wilts, take 15-20 minutes to blanch and freeze the excess.
- Split produce purchases with a friend or neighbor. You will be less likely to end up with too much food and you will save money!

- Buy local. Less food miles = less time in the food supply chain = less waste.
- Learn to love ugly produce. When you buy the strangely shaped fruits and veggies at the farmers' markets, you show farmers you are okay with imperfect produce. We also need to pass on this important lesson to our clients. Take the time to understand the differences between the natural variations of harvests versus when an item is going bad, and then share the knowledge with others.
- Use what you have before buying more or going out to eat. Plan a picnic with friends where each brings a dish based on ingredients she has at home instead of going out to a restaurant. You can also get creative in the kitchen with substitutions in your recipes.
- Develop and share recipes for the edible parts of plants that we usually think of as trash. To learn more, check out Lela Swartz's article "Root-to-Stalk Cooking" in the [spring 2016 issue of The Grapevine](#).
- Support organizations that are working to reduce food waste by recovering and repurposing produce or expiring products. [City Harvest](#) is a great local example. The organization works to reduce both hunger and food waste in NYC.
- Participate in advocacy efforts to change the system. Figure out how you can support systematic changes, such as getting your supermarket to source ugly produce or getting a restaurant to donate leftover food to the hungry. Advocacy can also be as simple as signing petitions or calling state legislators.

Reality Check

Go easy on yourself! Just as with any lifestyle change, small steps are the key to success. For the items you do have to toss, try composting when possible. Keep the scraps in your fridge or freezer to help control smells, and check out the Department of Sanitation's [NYC Compost Project](#) for more information on what to do with the scraps. Not only does composting help the environment, your trash won't smell or fill up as often—benefits to be had all around!

References

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