

United States Department of Agriculture

Extension Service

Home Canning: Identifying and Handling Spoiled Canned Food¹

United States Department of Agriculture, Extension Service²

Do not taste food from a jar with an unsealed lid or food that shows signs of spoilage. You can more easily detect some types of spoilage in jars stored without screw bands. Growth of spoilage bacteria and yeast produces gas which pressurizes the food, swells lids, and breaks jar seals. As each stored jar is selected for use, examine its lid for tightness and vacuum. Lids with concave centers have good seals.

Next, while holding the jar upright at eye level, rotate the jar and examine its outside surface for streaks of dried food originating at the top of the jar. Look at the contents for rising air bubbles and unnatural color.

While opening the jar, smell for unnatural odors and look for spurting liquid and cottonlike mold growth (white, blue, black, or green) on the top food surface and underside of lid.

Spoiled low-acid foods, including tomatoes, may exhibit different kinds of spoilage evidence or very little evidence. Therefore, all suspect containers of spoiled low-acid foods, including tomatoes, should be treated as having produced botulinum toxin and handled carefully in one of two ways:

- If the swollen metal cans or suspect glass jars are still sealed, place them in a heavy garbage bag. Close and place the bag in a regular trash container or bury it in a nearby landfill.
- If the suspect cans or glass jars are unsealed, open, or leaking, they should be detoxified before disposal.

Detoxification process: Carefully place the suspect containers and lids on their sides in an 8-quart volume or larger stock pot, pan, or boiling-water canner. Wash your hands thoroughly. Carefully add water to the pot. The water should completely cover the containers with a minimum of a 1-inch level above the containers. Avoid splashing the water. Place a lid on the pot and heat the water to boiling. Boil 30 minutes to ensure detoxifying the food and all container components. Cool and discard the containers, their lids, and food in the trash or bury in soil.

Thoroughly scrub all counters, containers, and equipment including can opener, clothing, and hands that may have contacted the food or containers. Discard any sponges or wash cloths that may have been used in the cleanup. Place them in a plastic bag and discard in the trash.

1. This document was extracted from the "Complete Guide to Home Canning", Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 539, USDA. Reviewed 1994.
2. For more information on home canning, contact your local Extension Service agent.