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Make the most of your food challenge:

A behaviour change intervention to address the impacts of 'best before' dates on household food wasting

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Table of Contents

1.0 Research context	4
2.0 Research objective	4
3.0 Research methodology	4
4.0 Research findings	6
4.1 Participant demographics	6
4.2 Food wasting solely because of best before dates	6
Table 1. Pre- and post-challenge comparison of food wasting because of best before dates.	7
4.3 Knowledge of best before dates	7
Table 2. Pre- and post-challenge comparison of knowledge of best before dates.	8
4.4 Behaviours related to determining food safety	8
Table 3. Pre- and post-challenge comparison of behaviours related to determining food safety.	9
4.5 Food management behaviours	9
Table 4. Pre- and post-challenge comparison of food management behaviours.	10
5.0 Research impacts	10
6.0 References	12
Appendix A: Examples of challenge messages	14
Appendix B: Survey	15

1.0 Research context

In Canada, a ‘best before’ date is not the same as an ‘expiration’ date. ‘Expiry’ dates only appear on five types of food products with strict compositional and nutritional criteria:

- (1) infant formula,
- (2) meal replacements,
- (3) nutritional supplements,
- (4) formulated liquid diets used for oral or tube feeding, and
- (5) low-energy food products ordered by a physician and sold by a pharmacist [1].

A best before date indicates how long a properly stored, unopened food product will maintain its freshness, taste, and nutritional value [1]. According to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency [1]: “best before dates are not indicators of food safety, neither before nor after the date” (food safety section, para. 1). While it is not uncommon to find a best before date on shelf stable products, such as canned, dry, and frozen foods, best before dates are only required on foods with a shelf life of 90 days or less [1].

Best before dates contribute to the generation of food waste across the food system, from farm to fork. It is estimated that 23% of avoidable food waste (i.e., food that was at one time edible) generation in Canada is due to best before dates [2]. At the household-level, people regularly throw away food solely because a product’s best before date has passed [3, 4, 5].

2.0 Research objective

Driven by these findings, Love Food Hate Waste Canada developed the “Make the most of your food challenge” (i.e., “the challenge”) – a four week behaviour change intervention that aimed to reduce the impact of best before dates on household-level food wasting through increased food literacy and strengthened food skills. This research aimed to determine if and how the challenge influenced knowledge of best before dates, behaviours related to determining food safety, and relevant food management behaviours.

3.0 Research methodology

On October 18, 2025, Love Food Hate Waste Canada launched the challenge. The intervention was delivered virtually, over four weeks, and in English and French. The challenge focused on a new theme every week:

- (1) Take stock: See what's hiding in your fridge, freezer, and pantry;
- (2) Decode the date: Learn the truth about best before dates and how they can guide you to make the most of your food;
- (3) Revive and refresh: Top hacks to give food a second life; and
- (4) Cook from scraps: Turn 'nothing' into something delicious.

Each week, participants received three actionable messages that provided tips in accordance with the weekly theme (Appendix A). The first message was delivered in video format, the second was a static image, and the third was a text-based checklist. Messages were delivered via email or text message depending on participants' preferences.

Adults (19+) who lived in Canada were eligible to register and participate in the challenge. Information about the challenge was posted to Love Food Hate Waste Canada's social media channels, communicated in our newsletter, and broadly shared by our program partners and supporters. In total, there were 591 unique registrants for the challenge. Because the sample is limited by self-selection bias, the results of this research may not be representative of all Canadians.

A pre- and post-challenge survey (Appendix B) was created to measure food literacy and food skills related to best before dates, and to evaluate the possible impacts of the intervention. The survey included multiple series of questions investigating knowledge of best before dates, as well as the frequency of performing behaviours related to (1) determining food safety, (2) managing food at home, and (3) disposing of food. Questions were measured on a five-point Likert or frequency scale, with higher scores representing more knowledge or higher performance frequency of behaviours. The survey concluded with several demographic and socioeconomic questions. Because this methodology involved the collection of self-reported data, the results may be limited by recall bias and social desirability bias.

All challenge registrants were invited to participate in the two, 10-minute online surveys (available in both English and French). The pre-challenge survey was accessible on the challenge registration webpage, and both surveys were disseminated through text messages and emails sent to challenge registrants. Participants had the opportunity to complete the pre-challenge survey between September 12 and October 23, 2025. The post-challenge survey was open between November 15 and November 20, 2025. A letter of information accompanied each survey and written consent was obtained from all participants. To incentivize participation, consenting participants who completed both surveys were entered into a draw to win one of four \$500 gift cards for groceries. Additionally, the first 50 participants to complete the challenge in full (including both surveys) received a 'Fridge Friend unit' (valued at \$92).

In total, 161 valid responses (27% response rate) were collected from participants that completed both the pre- and post-challenge surveys. Statistical analyses were conducted with these data to determine

what impact, if any, the intervention had on knowledge and behaviours related to best before dates. The mean and standard deviation were calculated for knowledge, behaviour, and demographic variables. Paired samples t-tests were used to assess mean differences in food literacy and food skills between the pre-challenge period and the post-challenge period. A two-sided p -value of < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

4.0 Research findings

4.1 Participant demographics

Most participants were women (95%), over the age of 50 (68%), and reported that they were responsible for all or most of the food work in their household (78%). While the participant sample is not representative of the gender diversity in Canada [6], women are still primarily responsible for foodwork in many Canadian households [7]. Participants primarily lived in Ontario (38%), followed by British Columbia (20%), and then Manitoba (17%). Relative to Canada's population distribution [8], there was an overrepresentation of participants from British Columbia and Manitoba, and an underrepresentation of participants from Alberta (8%) and Quebec (9%). Many participants (46%) lived in a two-person household, and most participants lived in an urban community (86%) and in a child-free household (78%). The urban-to-rural participation ratio aligns closely with national demographics [9]. Overall, the sample ($n = 161$) may not be representative of the national population.

4.2 Food wasting solely because of best before dates

Consistent with previous research [3, 4, 5], prior to the challenge, many participants self-reported throwing away food solely because its best before date had passed. More participants reported throwing out fruit and vegetables, meat and fish, and dairy products for this reason compared to other types of food. However, some participants reported throwing away frozen (10%), dried (19%), and canned/jarred (22%) food because it had passed its best before date, despite these being shelf stable products that do not require a best before date. After the challenge, participants were significantly less likely to report throwing away food just because it had passed its best before date ($p < 0.001$) (Table 1). Significant reductions in the self-reported frequency of throwing away food for this reason were observed in all measured food categories, except frozen foods. Following the challenge, 85% of participants reported that they never wasted food for this reason.

Table 1. Pre- and post-challenge comparison of food wasting because of best before dates.

Variables: Food wasting solely because of 'best before' dates	Pre-challenge Mean (SD)	Post-challenge Mean (SD)	<i>t</i> (df)
Fruit and vegetables	1.35 (0.63)	1.16 (0.43)	3.58*** (160)
Meat and fish	1.35 (0.63)	1.16 (0.43)	3.58*** (160)
Dairy	1.41 (0.82)	1.19 (0.54)	3.19** (151)
Bread and bakery	1.37 (0.67)	1.11 (0.37)	4.88*** (156)
Dried food	1.26 (0.65)	1.13 (0.48)	2.50* (157)
Canned and jarred food	1.26 (0.65)	1.10 (0.36)	3.19** (159)
Frozen food	1.28 (0.64)	1.09 (0.42)	3.35** (159)
Combined food categories	1.15 (0.53)	1.07 (0.36)	1.00 (149)

Paired samples t-tests (2-tailed): * $p < 0.05$ level; ** $p < 0.01$ level, *** $p < 0.001$ level.

Note: SD = standard deviation | df = degrees of freedom

4.3 Knowledge of best before dates

Before the challenge, most participants (77%) either did not know if best before dates indicated food safety or thought that they were indicators. There was a significant increase in participant knowledge of best before dates following the challenge ($p < 0.001$) (Table 2). Seventy-five percent of participants knew, after the challenge, that best before dates are not indicators of food safety and 94% knew that best before dates differ from expiry dates.

Table 2. Pre- and post-challenge comparison of knowledge of best before dates.

'Knowledge of' variables	Pre-challenge Mean (SD)	Post-challenge Mean (SD)	<i>t</i> (df)
Best before dates as indicators of food safety	3.60 (1.08)	4.00 (1.14)	-4.60*** (160)
What 'best before' dates truly indicate	3.74 (1.03)	3.84 (1.18)	-1.04 (159)
Differences between 'best before' and 'expiry' dates (inverted)	1.76 (0.93)	1.43 (0.68)	4.08*** (159)

Paired samples t-tests (2-tailed): * $p < 0.05$ level; ** $p < 0.01$ level, *** $p < 0.001$ level.

Note: SD = standard deviation | df = degrees of freedom

4.4 Behaviours related to determining food safety

Prior to the challenge, when determining if food was safe to eat, most participants (64%) considered a food's best before date half the time or more frequently. Following the challenge, participants were significantly more likely to look beyond a food's best before date when determining if it was safe to eat ($p < 0.001$) (Table 3). Participants considered a food's best before date less often after the challenge ($p = 0.01$), and instead considered how long they had had the food ($p = 0.04$), how the food had been stored ($p < 0.001$), the type of food ($p = 0.001$), and signs of spoilage ($p = 0.03$) more frequently.

Table 3. Pre- and post-challenge comparison of behaviours related to determining food safety.

Determinants of food safety variables	Pre-challenge Mean (SD)	Post-challenge Mean (SD)	<i>t</i> (df)
The food's 'best before' date	3.28 (1.21)	2.99 (1.34)	2.56* (160)
How long you have had the food at home for	3.66 (1.16)	3.86 (1.15)	-2.12* (158)
How the food was stored	3.91 (1.22)	4.44 (0.90)	-4.95*** (159)
The type of food	4.22 (0.93)	4.48 (0.85)	-3.30** (160)
Signs of spoilage	4.58 (0.82)	4.74 (0.67)	-2.19* (160)
Combined determinants without 'best before' dates	4.09 (0.76)	4.38 (0.68)	-4.87*** (160)

Paired samples *t*-tests (2-tailed): * $p < 0.05$ level; ** $p < 0.01$ level, *** $p < 0.001$ level.

Note: SD = standard deviation | df = degrees of freedom

4.5 Food management behaviours

Following the challenge, there were also significant increases in the frequency of using various food management skills to better manage food at home (Table 4). When storing food, participants more frequently considered the best way and place to store perishable food to keep items fresh ($p < 0.001$). Participants also labelled food products to indicate the date it was opened, purchased, put in the freezer, etc. more often ($p < 0.001$); managed the food in their fridge more regularly ($p < 0.001$); and more frequently froze food to extend its shelf life ($p = 0.04$). When preparing food, participants increased how often they prepared meals by improvising with available ingredients at home ($p = 0.008$) and searched for recipes to help them use up ingredients more often ($p < 0.001$). Participants also more frequently saved leftover meals to eat later ($p < 0.001$) as well as leftover ingredients ($p < 0.001$) to use in the preparation of future meals.

Table 4. Pre- and post-challenge comparison of food management behaviours.

Food management variables	Pre-challenge Mean (SD)	Post-challenge Mean (SD)	<i>t</i> (df)
Prepare meals by improvising with available ingredients	3.57 (1.09)	3.77 (0.91)	-2.69** (158)
Search for & follow recipes to use up ingredients at home	2.76 (1.17)	3.26 (1.12)	-6.08*** (160)
Store perishable food to keep it fresh for longer	3.82 (1.12)	4.14 (0.92)	-3.40*** (160)
Label food to indicate when it was opened/frozen/etc.	2.44 (1.43)	3.05 (1.32)	-5.56*** (160)
Manage the food in the fridge	3.06 (1.27)	3.82 (1.00)	-7.67*** (159)
Freeze food to extend its shelf life	3.37 (1.10)	3.57 (1.11)	-2.10* (159)
Save leftover meals to eat later	4.25 (0.93)	4.57 (0.71)	-4.35*** (160)
Save leftover ingredients to use for a future meal	3.57 (1.24)	4.09 (1.02)	-4.64*** (160)

Paired samples t-tests (2-tailed): * $p < 0.05$ level; ** $p < 0.01$ level, *** $p < 0.001$ level.

Note: SD = standard deviation | df = degrees of freedom

5.0 Research impacts

Wasting food is not a single behaviour, but the result of multiple behaviours [10]. There is a growing understanding that food literacy and food skills knowledge may contribute to the generation and reduction of household-level food waste. Thus, knowledge of how perceptions of best before dates,

behaviours related to determining food safety, and food management skills influence household food wasting contributes to our understanding of the complex, intersecting factors that result in wasted food. The results of this research justify the need for further policies, programs, and initiatives in Canada that aim to increase knowledge of best before dates and strengthen food skills related to food safety and management.

6.0 References

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Appendix A: Examples of challenge messages



Appendix B: Survey

Love Food Hate Waste Canada's "Make the Most of Your Food" Survey

Love Food Hate Waste Canada is continuing to develop a better understanding of consumer- and household-level food waste generation in Canada. The results from these surveys will be utilized in the development and implementation of programs and initiatives aimed at reducing and sustainably managing food waste across the country.

Letter of Information and Consent

Dear potential participant,

Love Food Hate Waste Canada invites adults who are 19 years or older and currently living in Canada to participate in a pre- and post-challenge survey exploring knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours related to household-level food wasting.

What are these surveys for?

Love Food Hate Waste Canada is continuing to develop a better understanding of consumer- and household-level food waste generation in Canada. The results from these surveys will be utilized in the development and implementation of programs and initiatives aimed at reducing and sustainably managing food waste across the country.

What will happen during these surveys?

The challenge involves two surveys: the first administered at the onset of the *Make the Most of Your Food* Challenge period, and the second administered at the end. Each survey should only take you about 10 minutes to complete. You will be asked a series of multiple-choice questions related to knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours connected to food wasting. There are no right or wrong answers.

What are the risks and benefits of completing the surveys?

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in these surveys. Please note that because we are collecting personal identifiers, there is always the risk of a privacy breach. You may not directly benefit from participating, but the information gathered may benefit FoodMesh, the team behind Love Food Hate Waste Canada, and society by helping to direct future food waste reduction programs and initiatives.

Can I choose to withdraw my survey responses?

If you decide to withdraw your survey responses, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. The Love Food Hate Waste Canada team will need your unique survey ID number (located at the end of the first survey) to withdraw your data. It is important to note that a record of your participation must remain with the project, and as such, the Love Food Hate Waste Canada team may not be able to destroy your survey ID on the master list. However, any data may be withdrawn upon your request. Once the survey results have been published, we will not be able to withdraw your information.

How will my information be kept confidential?

Below is a description of important identifying data that we will be collecting and how it will be used:

- Email address: Used to communicate with participants who indicate an interest in participating in future Love Food Hate Waste Canada opportunities and to contact the winners of the draw and Fridge Friend units.
- Age, gender, and ethnicity: Important factors related to food wasting, food management, and other environmental variables.
- Postal code: Postal codes represent groups of addresses which can cover an entire city block, a single high-rise building, or an entire small rural community. We will use the postal code information to determine which Canadian communities are represented in the results of these surveys.

There is some risk that providing your postal code along with other identifying information, such as annual household income, could be used to identify you. To minimize this risk, the data will be immediately separated into three separate datasets containing (1) consent information, (2) survey data, and (3) postal codes to maximize confidentiality. The risk of identification will also be minimized as the results of these surveys will only be presented for groups so that you will never be individually identifiable.

How am I compensated for completing these surveys?

If you complete both the pre- and post-challenge survey, you will be entered into a draw to win one of four \$500 gift cards for groceries. In addition, the first 50 participants to complete the challenge in full, including the pre- and post-challenge survey, will receive a Fridge Friend unit (valued at \$92). If you are one of the first 50 people to complete both surveys and/or win the draw, you will be notified via the email address you provided and will be able to claim your prize by providing the Love Food

Hate Waste Canada team your mailing address within 48 hours of being notified. The contest terms and conditions can be reviewed on the Love Food Hate Waste Canada website.

What are my rights as a participant?

Your participation in these surveys is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in these surveys. Even if you consent to participate you have the right not to answer individual questions or to withdraw from the opportunity.

Who can I contact if I have more questions?

Should you have any questions or concerns about participating in this project, you can contact the Love Food Hate Waste Canada team at lovefoodhatewaste@foodmesh.ca.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Part I: Participant Consent

1. Do you consent to participate in this survey?
 - Yes, I consent.
 - No, I do not consent.
2. Would you like to enter a draw to win one of four \$500 gift cards for groceries or one Fridge Friend unit (valued at \$92) for participating in the two challenge surveys: this one and another that will be administered at the end of the “Make the Most of Your Food” Challenge period?
 - Yes
 - No
3. Please enter your email address.

Part II: Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviours

4. In the past two weeks, when determining if food was safe to eat, how often did you consider the food’s best before date?
 - Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always

5. In the past two weeks, when determining if food was safe to eat, how often did you consider how long you had the food?
- Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
6. In the past two weeks, when determining if food was safe to eat, how often did you consider how the food was stored?
- Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
7. In the past two weeks, when determining if food was safe to eat, how often did you consider the type of food (e.g., vegetable, meat, dairy, etc.)?
- Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
8. In the past two weeks, when determining if food was safe to eat, how often did you consider signs of spoilage (e.g., mould, change in colour, change in smell, etc.)?
- Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
9. In the past two weeks, how often did you prepare meals by improvising with available ingredients at home?
- Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time

- Most of the time
 - Always
- 10. In the past two weeks, how often did you search for and follow recipes that helped you use up ingredients you had at home?
 - Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
- 11. In the past two weeks, how often did you consider the best way and place to store perishable food to keep items fresh for longer?
 - Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
- 12. In the past two weeks, how often did you manage the food in your fridge, such as organizing items by what needed to be eaten first?
 - Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
- 13. In the past two weeks, how often did you freeze food to extend its shelf life?
 - Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
- 14. In the past two weeks, how often did you save leftover meals to eat later?
 - Never
 - Sometimes

- About half the time
- Most of the time
- Always

15. In the past two weeks, how often did you save leftover ingredients to use in the preparation of a future meal?

- Never
- Sometimes
- About half the time
- Most of the time
- Always

16. In the past two weeks, how often did you label food products to indicate the date it was opened, purchased, put in the freezer, etc.?

- Never
- Sometimes
- About half the time
- Most of the time
- Always

17. In the past two weeks, how often did you throw out fruit and vegetables (e.g. spinach, mushrooms, berries, pineapple, etc.) solely because a product's best before date had passed?

- Never
- Sometimes
- About half the time
- Most of the time
- Always
- Not applicable because this type of food is not found in my household

18. In the past two weeks, how often did you throw out meat and meat products (e.g., poultry, beef, seafood, eggs, etc.) solely because a product's best before date had passed?

- Never
- Sometimes
- About half the time
- Most of the time
- Always
- Not applicable because this type of food is not found in my household

19. In the past two weeks, how often did you throw out dairy products (e.g., milk, yogurt, cheese, etc.) solely because a product's best before date had passed?
- Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
 - Not applicable because this type of food is not found in my household
20. In the past two weeks, how often did you throw out bread and baked goods (e.g., bread, tortillas, pastries, etc.) solely because a product's best before date had passed?
- Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
 - Not applicable because this type of food is not found in my household
21. In the past two weeks, how often did you throw out dried food (e.g., rice, noodles, crackers, cereal, granola bars, etc.) solely because a product's best before date had passed?
- Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
 - Not applicable because this type of food is not found in my household
22. In the past two weeks, how often did you throw out canned and jarred food (e.g., beans, peanut butter, tomato sauce, pickles, etc.) solely because a product's best before date had passed?
- Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
 - Not applicable because this type of food is not found in my household

23. In the past two weeks, how often did you throw out frozen food (e.g., pizza, ready-to-heat meals, ice cream, etc.) solely because a product's best before date had passed?
- Never
 - Sometimes
 - About half the time
 - Most of the time
 - Always
 - Not applicable because this type of food is not found in my household
24. In Canada, best before dates on food labels indicate food safety.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
25. In Canada, best before dates on food labels indicate how long an unopened product will keep its freshness, taste, and nutritional value.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
26. In Canada, 'best before dates' and 'expiry dates' on food labels are the same.
- Strongly disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
27. How would you describe the division of food-related responsibilities (e.g., shopping, preparing, cooking, etc.) in your household over the past two weeks?
- I did all the food work
 - I did most of the food work
 - We shared food work equally
 - Someone else did most of the food work

- Someone else did all of the food work

Part III: Socio-Demographic Information

28. Please input the first three digits of your postal code.

29. What is your current age in years?

30. What is your gender identity?

31. What is your ethnic identity?

32. How many people live in your household?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6+

33. How many children (under 18) live in your household?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5+

34. What is your before tax annual household income?

- Less than \$40,000
- \$40,001 to \$60,000
- \$61,000 to \$80,000
- \$80,001 to \$100,000
- \$101,000 to \$120,000
- \$120,001 to \$140,000
- \$140,001 to \$160,000
- \$160,001 to \$180,000
- \$180,001+

Part IV: Future Opportunities

35. Are we able to contact you about future Food Hate Waste Canada opportunities at the email address you've provided?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No