

# Extension's Successful FAMILY



You have the will. We have the way.

Fall 2011

## Get started on your retirement plan now

Retirement planning has changed dramatically. From World War II until the 1980s, employer-provided defined-benefit plans, such as pension plans, were the dominant form of retirement benefit in the United States. Retirees with a pension plan receive retirement income according to a formula based on the employee's number of years of service and level of pay before retirement.

Under a pension plan, the employer must ensure that the plan can provide a monthly income to retirees for the rest of their lives. According to *US News & World Report* ("Raising the Retirement Age," August 5, 2008), retirement periods used to be shorter—about 12.5 years for the average person who reached age 65 in 1940. Shorter retirement periods made pension plans easier to fund. But as life expectancy increases, retirement periods are getting longer: people who reached age 65 in 2007 could expect an average retirement of 18 years. As a result, pension plans are much less common today.

Now the most popular type of retirement plan is the defined-contribution plan, such as a 401(k). Defined-contribution plans require the worker to put money in an investment account each month. Workers must make investment decisions and bear the risk of market fluctuations. Defined-contribution plans do not make income guarantees; rather, the amount and duration of retirement income are determined by the value of investment assets and the length of the retirement period.

It's important to take responsibility for building retirement assets. To get a handle on your retirement, follow these tips:

- **Discuss retirement decisions with your spouse or partner.**
- **Develop and follow a well-thought-out investment plan.** Invest a regular amount at a regular time interval.
- **Invest as much as you can as early as you can.** Invest 10 percent of gross income through your 30s, 15 percent in your 40s, and 20 percent in your 50s and 60s.
- **Pay off all your debt, including your home mortgage, before retirement.**
- **Review your Social Security benefit.** Consider the age at which you will begin to claim benefits, which will affect the size of the benefit.
- **Envision your retirement lifestyle.** Before you retire, think about how you



will spend your time and where you will live during retirement.

- **Make a retirement spending plan.** List current income and expenses, and note which expenses will continue, decrease, or stop when you retire. Then add expenses that will begin at retirement, such as Medigap health insurance premiums. Remember that you might need to withdraw less from retirement accounts in years when investments do not perform well.

## Help your children deal with stress

The ability to deal with everyday stresses is an important life skill. Parents need to understand that stress can affect children as well as adults. That's why it's important to help children develop healthy ways of coping with stress.

A few simple strategies can help your children handle stress:

- Establish and maintain a daily routine.
- Have family conversations where all members of the family can discuss their experiences and feelings.

- Keep family traditions, and create new traditions if you need to.
- Help family members adjust to life events by being responsive and supportive.
- Stay in contact with family members through phone, e-mail, or texting.
- If you think you or your children need extra help, seek support from school and community organizations.

For more information on helping your children handle stress, go online to <http://ncfamilies.com>.

## Confused by food dates?

Have you ever been confused by the dates you see on food products? It's often easy to find and read the date on a food package—but what does a food date tell you?

First, it's helpful to know that food products display four kinds of dates:

**1. “Sell by” date:** This date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the sell-by date expires.

**2. “Best before” date:** The manufacturer recommends that you eat the food by this date to obtain the best flavor and quality. This is not the date by which you should purchase the food; nor is it a safety date.

**3. “Use by” date:** This is the last date recommended for consumption of the product while at peak quality. The use-by date, like the other dates, is determined by the manufacturer.

**4. “Closed” or “coded” date:** This type of date is stamped on a food package as part of a packing number used by the manufacturer.

Many products will be safe to consume after their sell-by and best-before dates if they have been handled properly and have been kept at a safe temperature (41°F or below for refrigerated products). However, you should use a food product before its use-by date for both quality and safety reasons. This is especially true for people at high risk for foodborne illness—such as

pregnant women, babies, and people with weakened immune systems—who should eat pre-cooked or ready-to-eat food as soon as possible after purchase.

You should also keep a close eye on foods that are at high risk for contamination with *Listeria monocytogenes*, a pathogenic bacterium that can grow at refrigerator temperatures and can make you sick if you consume it. Foods at high risk for *Listeria* contamination include soft cheeses, unpasteurized (raw) milk and cheese, smoked seafood, and deli meats that are not in sealed or prepackaged containers. Follow United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) refrigerator storage-time guidelines:

- **Hot dogs**—Store opened packages in the refrigerator for no longer than one week, and store unopened packages in the refrigerator for no longer than two weeks.



- **Luncheon and deli meat**—Store opened packages and meat sliced at a local deli in the refrigerator for no longer than three to five days. Store factory-sealed, unopened packages for no longer than two weeks.

## How do bacteria affect your food?

Manufacturers put dates on food products to protect consumers from bacteria that can contaminate food. Two categories of bacteria affect the quality and safety of food products:



**1. Spoilage bacteria** can cause a food product to have an unpleasant odor, flavor, texture, or appearance, but food that is spoiled in this way usually won't harm you. Spoilage bacteria generally cause quality issues, not safety issues.

**2. Pathogenic bacteria**, however, can make you sick. What's more, pathogenic bacteria often do not affect the taste, smell, or appearance of food. Food that has been contaminated by pathogenic bacteria should not be eaten for safety reasons.

If a product only has a sell-by date or has no date on it, cook or freeze it according to the USDA storage chart found at [http://www.fsis.usda.gov/factsheets/basics\\_for\\_handling\\_food\\_safely/#2](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/factsheets/basics_for_handling_food_safely/#2).

For optimum food safety, follow these guidelines:

- Purchase the product before the sell-by, best-before, or use-by date (whichever one is on the package).
- Immediately after you purchase perishable food, take it home and refrigerate or freeze it.
- Use a refrigerator thermometer to check the temperature inside your refrigerator. The refrigerator should be 41°F or lower, and the freezer should be 0°F or lower.
- Once a product is frozen, it doesn't matter whether its use-by date passes, because freezing stops the growth of pathogenic bacteria.

## What's in Season?

# Pumpkin—a delicious addition to the autumn table

There's a good reason why pumpkins are associated with autumn: 80 percent of the pumpkins harvested in the United States are available in October. At this time of year, fresh pumpkins are piled high in front of stores, at roadside stands, and at farmers markets, or ripe for the picking at pumpkin farms.

Pumpkin is high in vitamin A, potassium, and dietary fiber. Half a cup of this

delicious plant provides only 40 calories. Pumpkin is well known for its uses in pies and quick breads, but there are many ways to incorporate this versatile food into healthy meals.

You may have cooked with canned pumpkin before, but this year, consider using fresh pumpkin. When selecting pumpkins for cooking, choose relatively small ones that feel hard, have no soft spots or cracks, and seem heavy in relation to their size. Store them in a cool, dry place for up to two months. Refrigerate cut pumpkin for up to four days.

Try these pumpkin serving ideas:

- Include bite-sized pumpkin pieces in stir-fries.
- Drizzle chunks of pumpkin with a little olive oil and roast them at 425°F for 20–25 minutes.
- Turn pureed pumpkin into a savory soup by thinning it with vegetable or chicken broth and seasoning it with rubbed sage, curry powder, nutmeg, or ground cinnamon.
- Substitute pumpkin for winter squash or sweet potatoes in most recipes.

- Serve mashed or cubed cooked pumpkin as a side dish, seasoned with ground cinnamon.



- Grate raw pumpkin into stuffing served with chicken or turkey.
- Baked pumpkin halves are delicious served stuffed with meat, rice, or vegetable mixtures.
- Swirl together pumpkin purée and a small amount of maple syrup in a steaming bowl of hot cereal.
- Add fresh pumpkin chunks to your favorite vegetable or beef stew.
- Perk up ordinary mashed potatoes by mashing in some cooked pumpkin.
- Toast pumpkin seeds in the oven, and season them with a favorite herb blend for savory flavor.

## BAKED PUMPKIN

Making fresh pumpkin puree is easy! Here's how:

1. Cut the pumpkin in half.
2. Scoop out the seeds and stringy pulp.
3. Put the halves on a baking pan with the cut sides facing down.
4. Bake the pumpkin at 350°F for about 45 minutes (or cook it on a plate or glass dish in a microwave oven until the pulp is tender).
5. Allow the cooked pumpkin halves to stand for five minutes; then scoop the flesh out of the rind and into a food processor or blender.
6. Puree the pumpkin. Add seasonings to taste, and serve immediately or freeze for later use.

## Choose the right housing for your family

The single largest budget item for most families is housing. That's why your decisions about what kind of housing to buy or rent are so important. Housing decisions have become complex because of the many choices available today—single rooms, duplexes, single-family homes, condominiums, townhouses, manufactured homes, and elder housing.

When making the decision to buy or rent, first determine how much money is available. Begin by drawing up a monthly budget that accounts for such basic living expenses as groceries, clothing, transportation, medical and dental, recreation and

entertainment, insurance, education, and installment loans. Look at the past three months' expenses and divide by three to find the average amount spent monthly. Next, take the total monthly family income and subtract the average monthly expenditure from it. Your rent or mortgage payment will have to come out of the amount that's left.

Remember that mortgage payments are sometimes accompanied by fees paid to a homeowners' association. Other expenses that fluctuate based on size, type, and location of housing are gas, electricity, water, telephone, cable, automobile

maintenance, commuting costs, and yard and home maintenance.

How much should you spend on housing? Many experts advise spending no more than 25 to 30 percent of net monthly income. Another guideline is that monthly housing expenses combined with installment debt payments should not exceed 33 percent of household take-home pay.

Each situation is unique, depending on the interests, lifestyles, and long-range goals of your family; your current income; the kind of income you expect to have in the future; your family's size; and your employment stability.

## Build an emergency cash reserve

An emergency cash reserve is money set aside to cover changes in income or expenses that can arise from a variety of situations, such as unemployment, accidents or illnesses, or natural disasters. An emergency fund also helps with such smaller expenses as a flat tire or an appliance repair.

Most experts recommend having an emergency fund equal to three to six months of living expenses, including mortgage or rent payments, insurance premiums, utility bills, groceries, car payments, student loans, and minimum payments on credit cards.

Begin building your emergency cash reserve by putting 5 to 10 percent of your gross income in some type of interest-bearing bank account every month. Deposit money that will be needed immediately after an emergency in an interest-bearing checking, savings, or money-market account. Money needed for three to twelve months after an emergency can be placed in short-term certificates of deposit (CDs) or six-month Treasury bills.

For longer-term reserves, invest in a market mutual fund or in CDs with terms lasting twelve, eighteen, or twenty-four months. Shop for the best combination of initial deposit amount, interest rate, compounding period, and yield. Be sure to check whether there are fees to redeem a CD before its maturity date.



### Extension's Successful FAMILY

This quarterly newsletter is written by a team of North Carolina Cooperative Extension family and consumer education agents. The purpose of the newsletter is to inform and educate families on issues that affect them, and to provide ideas for helping improve their quality of life. An educational outreach of NC State and NC A&T State universities, Cooperative Extension is located in every county and the Cherokee Reservation.

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