

how bad is it...

Straight answers to scratch-your-head questions.



...to toss your kids' artwork without telling them?

A: It's easy for your house to become buried under a mountain of macaroni sculptures. But secretly trashing your children's work could cause trust problems if they find out. Instead, ask about the items to determine whether certain pieces mean something special, says Ryan J. Madigan, Psy.D., a child psychologist and director of the Boston Child Study Center. If your kids don't seem to care, throw it away. But if they're especially fond of something, you might want to hang on to it a bit longer. "Then again, some kids want to keep *everything*, so if that's the case, be direct," says Madigan. "Say 'We don't have room to save everything. Can you pick your favorites?'" Then send relatives some choice pieces. P.S.: Even if your kids are grown up, it's still nice to ask before you toss.

BOTTOM LINE: pretty bad!

WRITTEN BY JESSICA DODELL-FEDER AND SARAH GROSSBART

...to lick an envelope seal?

A: If closing a birthday card makes you think of the infamous "toxic envelope" *Seinfeld* episode, you can relax. According to the Envelope Manufacturers Association, envelope glue is made primarily of a sugar- or cornstarch-and-water solution that's safe for consumption (even if it doesn't taste good). Likewise, you don't need to worry about picking up germs. "There may be bacteria on the envelope, but they're very unlikely to be pathogens, which are what can make you sick," says Michael Greger, M.D., founder of nutritionfacts.org. If it still gives you the icks, you can always wet the seal with a sponge or an envelope moistener (available at office supply stores), or use the peel-and-stick kind instead.

BOTTOM LINE:

it's fine!



...to never clean your winter coat?

A: Although your jacket doesn't need the level of cleaning that, say, your socks do, you should wash it once in a while. "Most insulated jackets are made of fabric that's meant to protect you from snow and rain, and if it becomes grimy, it will lose some of its ability to repel water," says Rick Griffin, director of quality for The North Face. Even coats that appear spotless should be cleaned once a year to keep them smelling and looking fresh. It's easy to do: While there are some exceptions (check your coat's care label to be sure), many insulated jackets can be washed in warm water on the gentle cycle. To dry, Griffin suggests zipping the coat closed, turning it inside out, and tumble-drying on low. Then shake out the jacket and puff it up.

BOTTOM LINE:

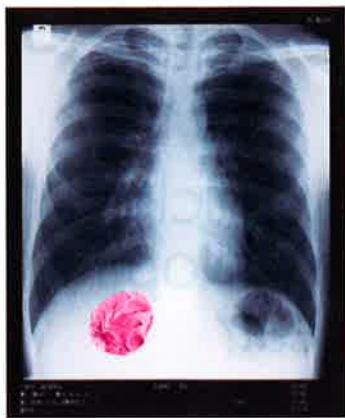
sorta bad!

how bad is it...

...to cook with expired eggs?

A: Make that quiche without fear. "As long as they're refrigerated, eggs are generally good for three weeks after you buy them," says Elisa Maloberti, director of egg product marketing for the American Egg Board. By then, the expiration date on the carton may have passed, but since that's more of a sell-by guide for stores than a sign of the food's edibility, it won't affect the taste or safety—especially if you're cooking the egg, which will kill any bacteria. That said, very old eggs may not whip up as well, so if you're making something like a meringue or soufflé—where fluffiness counts—you may want to buy a fresh carton.

BOTTOM LINE:
it's fine!



...to swallow gum?

A: Despite what your mom may have told you, that piece you accidentally gulped won't stay in your stomach for seven years. Like any food, it will probably pass through your system within two days. "Your body can't digest gum, but that doesn't make it dangerous," says Kevin Ruff, M.D., a gastroenterologist at the Mayo Clinic in Arizona. "Swallowing it is like swallowing anything else you eat." That is, unless you're ingesting a giant wad at once or numerous pieces in a day, in which case the gum could form a mass and get stuck in your stomach, intestine, or colon. Although rare, this complication occurs most often in young children, says Dr. Ruff, so save gum-chewing for kids who are old enough to understand they have to spit it out, usually around age 5 or 6.

BOTTOM LINE:
not so bad!

...to share lip balm?

A: You might end up with more than a moisturized pout. "Every time you swipe the balm over your lips, it picks up germs, saliva, and dead skin cells," says Jessica Wu, M.D., an assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. So you could be layering on bacteria like E. coli, which could give you a nasty stomachache, or staph, which can cause a skin infection called impetigo. If the person you're borrowing from is prone to cold sores (about 60% of the population is), you could end up with them too. Sharing with your spouse or kids poses no greater risk than kissing them on the lips, but if someone in your family has been sick, play it safe and, before using, wipe the balm with a dry tissue followed by a swab dipped in alcohol.

BOTTOM LINE:
really bad!



...to top off your gas tank after the nozzle clicks off?

A: Resist the urge to round up to the nearest dollar. The more gas you force into your tank beyond its capacity, the more gas vapors you force out—either into the atmosphere as pollutants, or into your car's vapor-collection system, which could become overloaded. That's not the only drawback, says Don Sherman, technical director of *Car and Driver* magazine. The nozzle shuts off when your tank is full, so those last few drops you're paying for could remain in the fuel hose. Once you hang up the nozzle, says Sherman, "the gas drains right back into the station's reservoir." It may be pennies, but still—what a waste of money!

BOTTOM LINE:
super bad!