

Food Product Dating: What do those dates mean?

Extension Food Safety Fact Sheet- August 2014



Most consumers don't want to serve "outdated" food to their families, but they also don't want to throw food away unnecessarily. However, the current system of food product dating in the US can be very confusing, with a number of different types of dates on food product labels that are not necessarily related to food safety.

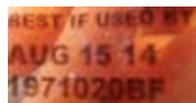
So how can consumers try to keep themselves and their families from getting sick from eating food that is past its prime of safety, but also not waste food? Here are a few tips:

- 1) The [only food product on which expiration dates are federally regulated](#) is infant formula. Therefore, you should NOT buy or use baby formula after its "use-by" date, for both safety and nutritional reasons.
- 2) Some states do require dating of some foods, but other than infant formula, there is no regulated food dating system across the US. Various groups have made recommendations to standardize the system used, but at this time, dates are put on products in a variety of ways. USDA does provide the following definitions for various terms used on food product labels:

- **"Sell by" date:** Tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before that date.



- **"Best if used by (or before)" date:** Recommended for best flavor or quality. It is NOT a purchase or safety date.



- **"Use by" date:** The last date recommended by the manufacturer for the use of the product while at peak quality.



*Note that these dates generally refer to food quality, rather than safety. However, they can give a general idea of how long the food has been in the market.

- 3) Many canned foods are required to have a packing code which enables manufacturers to rotate their stock and locate their products in the event of a recall. These codes are NOT meant for consumers to interpret in any way as use-by dates (unless they are clearly marked as a “use-by” date).
- 4) The most important thing consumers can do to impact the length of time they can *safely* keep and use food is to handle it properly. This includes the following:
 - If perishable, take the food home immediately after purchase and refrigerate it (at 40°F or below) within at least 2 hours. Freeze it if you can't use it within [recommended safe refrigerated storage times](#).
 - Note that once a perishable product is frozen, microbial growth stops, so it will be as safe as it was when it went into the freezer.
 - Store foods in the [cupboard, refrigerator or freezer](#) at the proper temperature and length of time. Do not leave perishable foods at room temperature for more than 2 hours. For example, if you know that a carton of milk has been sitting on the counter for more than 3 hours, throw it out.
 - If the product has a “use-by” date on the package, follow that date to determine when to use it. If it has a “sell-by” or no date, cook or freeze the product by the time in the storage charts in the above links.
 - Follow the handling and preparation instructions on the product label.
 - Avoid cross-contamination and ensure proper sanitation.
 - If the product does have visible mold, off odors, the can is bulging or other similar signs, this spoilage could be a sign that dangerous microorganisms may also be present, so with such products, use the “If in doubt, throw it out” rule.
- 5) With food that will be consumed by vulnerable populations (young children, the elderly, pregnant women, immune-compromised, people with limited mobility), extra caution should be exercised when determining how long to keep food in order to keep these groups as safe as possible.

For more information:

- Food Product Dating. USDA. August 2013. www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-safety-education/get-answers/food-safety-fact-sheets/food-labeling/food-product-dating/food-product-dating
- Safe Food Storage: The Refrigerator and Freezer. Kansas State Research and Extension. 2014: www.ksre.ksu.edu/bookstore/pubs/MF3130.pdf
- Safe Food Storage: The Cupboard. Kansas State Research and Extension. 2014: www.ksre.ksu.edu/bookstore/pubs/MF3131.pdf

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