WLG 142

West Virginia University
EXTENSION SERVICE

Discovering What Food Dates Really Mean

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Educational Objectives

1. Learn why food packages have dates.
2. Understand the difference in "sell-by," "best if used-by," "use-by," and "expiration" dates.
3. Increase knowledge about food safety and quality concerns with product dating.

Around the world people ask questions about the dates on food packages. What do all those dates mean? How long is food safe to eat after the sell-by date has passed? Should I throw it away? What's the difference between sell-by and use-by? If you have asked yourself these questions, don't worry, you are not alone! People throw away tons of food each year that is actually safe to eat. When looking at food dates, there are four common dates to be aware of: "sell-by" date, "best if used-by (or before)" date, "use-by" date, and the "expiration" date. But what do all these dates imply?

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), dates stamped on a product help the store determine how long to display it. It can also help you, the shopper, to know the time limit to purchase or use the product at its best quality. It is NOT a safety date. Food dates are used as a guide for quality and taste, not for safety. With the exception of baby food and infant formula, product dating is not required by United States federal law. Here are tips to discover what food dates really mean.

Types of Dates

The **"sell-by" date** refers to the last day a retailer can display a product for sale; typically, a food is safe to eat for several days after the "sell-by" date if refrigerated properly. "Sell-by" dates are found on perishables, like meat, seafood, poultry, and milk. The date is a guide for the store to sell the product. For example, milk that has been continuously

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refrigerated will usually remain drinkable for 5 to 7 days after the "sell-by" date. You can store ground beef in your refrigerator for 1 to 2 days after the "sell-by" date.

"Best if used-by (or before)" date is generally found on shelf-stable products, such as mustard, mayonnaise, and peanut butter. The "best if used-by" date is the last day a product will maintain its optimum flavor and texture. Beyond this date, the product begins to deteriorate, although it is still edible. The USDA states this is not a safety date, only a food quality date.

Like the "best if used-by" date, the **"use-by"** date is the last date recommended for the use of the product at peak quality. The manufacturer suggests to use the product by this date for the best flavor and texture.

"Expiration" date means what it says – if you haven't used a product by this date, toss it. This is most common with infant formula and baby food. If your food product has an "expiration" date, you should use the product before that date.

When Good Food Goes Bad!

Food has become very expensive and to throw it away is like throwing away money. Most foods we toss are actually safe to eat; however, there are some exceptions to this rule.

The most important question to ask is "how was this food stored and handled?" Storing and handling foods improperly cause bacteria to grow causing foodborne illnesses to occur. Ruined foods can develop an odor, bad flavor, or strange appearance due to spoilage. If you smell or see anything odd, throw the food away. Foods that are mishandled (i.e., left in the danger zone of 40 to 140 degrees Fahrenheit for more than 2 hours) can cause foodborne illnesses, even if the food hasn't expired.

Even if the product date expires during home storage, it should be safe and of good quality if handled properly. If the product has a "sell-by" date or no date, cook or freeze the product according to the package.

Guidelines to Use Regarding Food Dates for Specific Products

Canned foods have a packing code to track the product. This enables manufacturers to rotate their stock, as well as to locate their products in the event of a recall. Some cans will have a "best if used-by" date to assure quality. Canned foods are safe indefinitely, as long as they are not exposed to freezing temperatures or temperatures above 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Discard cans that are dented, rusted, or swollen.

Eggs need to be purchased before the "sell-by" date on the carton. Eggs need to stay in the coldest part of the refrigerator, not the door. Eggs should be used within 3 to 5 weeks of the "sell-by" date. Discard any eggs that are cracked or broken.

Dairy products, such as milk, should be stored at 40 degrees Fahrenheit and not left out of the refrigerator for extended time periods. If handled properly, milk should last 3 to 5 days past the "sell-by" date.

With cheese, there are several things to consider. Generally, the harder the cheese, the longer the shelf-life. Hard cheeses will typically keep for several months, whereas softer cheeses will keep for 1 to 3 weeks after opening. Large pieces of cheese tend to keep longer than shredded cheese. Processed cheese can be used for up to 6 months if refrigerated at 40 degrees Fahrenheit or below. Opened packages should be tightly rewrapped, refrigerated, and used within 3 to 4 weeks.

Cheese should be stored in the refrigerator between 35 and 40 degrees Fahrenheit in its original wrapping until ready to use. If cheese is removed from its original packaging, wrap it tightly with plastic film wrap. Remove all air from bagged cheese before resealing it. Once cheese is exposed to air, molding and dehydration may occur. The "best if used-by" date tells you how long the cheese will keep its best flavor or quality. Throw out soft cheeses that have been at room temperature for more than 4 hours.

Molds spread through cheese by producing hyphae, which are root-like structures. In hard cheeses, such as cheddar and many processed cheeses, these mold "roots" do not penetrate very far below the surface. If the block of cheese is large and molding is not extensive, remove the mold to save the remaining cheese. Remove at least 1 inch around and below the mold spot. Keep the knife out of the mold itself so it will not contaminate other parts of the cheese. Discard soft, shredded, or sliced cheese if it contains molds that are not a part of the manufacturing process. These molds can be dangerous.

Meat, fish, and poultry typically have a "sell-by" date. Although the store should pull the product from the shelf after this date, it is legal to still sell it. Most meat is safe to eat for 1 week after the "sell-by" date. Freeze chicken within 1 to 2 days of purchasing and meat within 3 to 5 days of purchasing. When freezing, it is important to make sure your poultry and meat are tightly wrapped in order to protect it from freezer burn. Freezer burn does not make food dangerous to eat, but it does damage the texture and taste. Once food is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires, because foods kept frozen are safe indefinitely.

Baked goods typically have a "use-by" date. Store-bought bread will typically last 5 to 7 days at room temperature, but it can last 1 to 2 weeks in the refrigerator. If the date on your bread or snacks has expired, it does not mean they have gone bad; once something goes stale, it has been depleted of moisture. Try storing it in a plastic bag for extended shelf-life.

Different snacks have varying expiration dates due to the amount of preservatives they are made with. Potato chips will last 1 month after the expiration date; crackers and pretzels can last up to 3 months. One of the longest lasting snacks is popcorn, which has a shelf-life of 1 to 2 years.

Tips for Storing Food

- Purchase the product before the food expires. Read labels carefully before purchasing.
- If perishable, place food in the refrigerator immediately.
- Protect foods from air by wrapping foods in plastic wrap or keeping them in airtight containers.
- Mark the date you purchased the food on the package before putting it away.
- Practice the "first in, first out" rule. Arrange non-perishable items so the older ones are in the front and can be eaten first. New items should be placed in the back.
- If you can't use perishables by the "use-by" date, freeze them.
- For additional information, visit *www.nationaldairycouncil.org, www.stilltasty.com*, and *www.fsis.usda.gov*.

Refrigerator Home Storage (at 40° F [4.4° C] or below) of Fresh or Uncooked Products *If product has a "used-by" date, follow that date. If product has "sell-by" date or no date, cook or freeze the product by the times on the following chart.*	
Product	**Storage Times After Purchase**
Poultry	1 or 2 days
Beef, veal, pork, and ground poultry	3 to 5 days
Ground meat and ground poultry	1 or 2 days
Fresh variety meats (liver, tongue, brain, kidneys, heart, chitterlings)	1 or 2 days
Cured ham (cook before eating)	5 to 7 days
Sausage from pork, beef, or turkey (uncooked)	1 or 2 days
Eggs	3 to 5 weeks

Refrigerator Home Storage (at 40° F [4.4° C] or below) of Processed Products Sealed at Plant *If product has a "used-by" date, follow that date. If product has "sell-by" date or no date, cook or freeze the product by the times on the following chart.*		
Processed Product	**Unopened, After Purchase**	**After Opening**
Cooked poultry	3 to 4 days	3 to 4 days
Cooked sausage	3 to 4 days	3 to 4 days
Sausage (hard/ dry, shelf-stable)	6 weeks/ pantry	3 weeks
Corned beef (uncooked, in pouch with pickling)	5 to 7 days	3 to 4 days
Vacuum-packed dinner (commerical brand with USDA seal)	2 weeks	3 to 4 days
Bacon	2 weeks	7 days
Hot dogs	2 weeks	1 week
Luncheon meat	2 weeks	3 to 5 days
Ham (fully cooked)	7 days	Slices, 3 days; Whole, 7 days
Ham (canned, labeled "keep refrigerated")	9 months	3 to 4 days
Ham (canned, shelf-stable)	2 years/ pantry	3 to 5 days
Canned meat and poultry (shelf-stable)	2 to 5 years/ pantry	3 to 4 days

References

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"Expiration Dates: Should You Pay Attention?" Still Tasty Shelf Talk, *http://www.stilltasty.com/articles/view/5*.

2014

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FH14-383