WL 142

West Virginia University
EXTENSION SERVICE

Discovering What Food Dates Really Mean

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Most foods we toss are actually safe to eat; however, there are some exceptions. Storing and handling foods improperly can cause foodborne illnesses to occur, even if the food hasn't expired.

People always ask questions about the dates on food packages. What do all those dates mean? According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), dates on a product help the store determine how long to display it. It can also help you to know the time limit to 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.

Types of Dates

"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.

"Best if used-by (or before)" date is found on shelf-stable products, such as mustard 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 quality begins to deteriorate, although it is still edible.

"Use-by" date is similar to "best if used-by" date. The best policy is 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.

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When Good Food Goes Bad!

Most foods we toss are actually safe to eat; however, there are some exceptions. Storing and handling foods improperly (left in the danger zone 40 to 140 degrees Fahrenheit for more than two hours) can cause foodborne illnesses to occur, even if the food hasn't expired. If you smell or see anything odd, throw the food away. Even if the product date expires, it should be safe and of good quality if handled properly.

Guidelines for Specific Products

Canned foods have a packing code to track the product. Canned foods are safe indefinitely, as long as they are not exposed to freezing temperatures or temperature above 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Discard cans that are dented, rusted, or swollen.

Eggs should be purchased before the "sell-by" date on the carton and should be used within 3 to 5 weeks of the "sell-by" date. Discard any eggs that are cracked or broken.

Milk should be stored at 40 degrees Fahrenheit and not left out of the refrigerator for extended time periods. Milk should last 3 to 5 days past the "sell-by" date.

With cheese, generally, the harder the cheese, the longer its shelf-life. Hard cheeses will keep for several months; however, softer cheeses will only keep for 1 to 3 weeks after opening. Processed cheese can be used for up to 6 months. Opened packages should be tightly rewrapped, refrigerated, and used within 3 to 4 weeks. The "best if used-by" date tells you how long the cheese will keep its best flavor or quality.

Meat, fish, and poultry have a "sell-by" date. Most meat is safe to eat for 1 week after the "sell-by" date; freeze meat after that. Frozen foods are safe indefinitely.

Baked goods have a "use-by" date. Store-bought bread will last 5 to 7 days at room temperature, but it can last 1 to 2 weeks in the refrigerator. Store it in a plastic bag for extended shelf-life.

Tips for Storing Food

- Purchase the product before the food expires. Read labels carefully.
- 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.
- Practice the "first in, first out" rule.
- 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*.

2014

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FH14-384

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