

Expiration, Use-By and Sell-By dates: What do they really mean?

October 30, 2019



Photo: Aviano Air Base

Often people open up their refrigerators, cupboards and cabinets to find foods that are beyond their sell- buy and use- buy dates. While it is always better to be safe than sorry, the following guidelines and information should help to take the guesswork out of determining whether or not your food is safe to eat.

Dating is not required by US Federal law, with the exception of infant formula and baby foods which must be withdrawn by their expiration date. For all other foods, except dairy products in some states, freshness dating is strictly voluntary on the part of manufacturers. For meat, poultry, and egg products under the jurisdiction of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), dates may be voluntarily applied provided they are not misleading and labeled in a manner that is in compliance with FSIS regulations. Also stores are not legally required to remove outdated products from their shelves. In order to ensure you getting the freshest food, it is necessary to scrutinize packaging and purchase the items with the most recent date. Although most markets are good about rotating their stock, some are not. If a store is properly stocked, the freshest items will be at the back of the shelf or underneath older items.

So what do these terms mean for consumers?

* Expiration Date: If you have a product with an expired expiration date, throw it out. While other dating terms are used as a basic guideline, this one is absolute.

**Best if Used-By and Use-By date:*

“Use-By” or: Best if Used By” dates are a suggestion for when the food item will be at its best quality. Food is generally safe if consumed past this date, but may have deteriorated in flavor, texture, or appearance. “Use- By” dates are most often found on canned goods, dry goods, condiments, or other shelf stable items. The Food and Drug Administration is supporting the food industry’s efforts to standardize the use of this on its packaged food labeling.

**Sell-By date:*

Many fresh or prepared foods are labeled with a “Sell-By” date as a guide for how long the item should be displayed for sale before quality deteriorates. Items are generally safe for consumption after this date, but may begin to lose flavor or eye appeal. “Sell-By” dates are chosen with the assumption that the buyer may store or eat the item a few days after purchase. To be sure your food is fresh and will keep at home, it is best not to buy items that are past their “ sell by” date.

**Guaranteed Fresh*

This date is often used for perishable baked goods. Beyond this date, freshness is no longer guaranteed, although it may still be edible.

**Pack date:*

This is the date the item was packed, most often used on canned and boxed items. It is usually in the form of a code and not easy to decipher. It may be coded by month(M), day (D) and year (Y) such as YYMMDD or MMDDYY. Or it may be coded using Julian numbers, where January 1 would be 001 and December 31 would be 365. These time stamps are generally a reference to the date, time, and location of the manufacture and not be confused with expiration dates. “Sell-By” or “ Best-By” may also be included on the can code.

So all of this assumes foods are stored at the right temperature. Foods not refrigerated properly – whether at home or at the store – wont keep as long regardless of what the freshness date says. So how long are foods good after the package date? According to the US Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety and Inspection Service:

- Milk is good for about a week after the “sell by” date
- Eggs can keep for three to five weeks beyond the “sell by” date
- Fresh chicken, turkey and ground meats should be cooked or frozen within two days
- Fresh beef, pork and lamb should be cooked or frozen within three to five days

Cooking or freezing extends the amount of time a food will keep. Use your eyes and nose too, to determine if foods are fresh, regardless of the date on the package.

So here are some food storage hints and tips:

- Once opened, many of the dates become obsolete since the contents now become perishable. It is advisable to use food as quickly as possible after opening them.
- Be sure to refrigerate leftovers in a covered container (not a can) and use within 3 to 5 days.
- Some canned foods (like condiments and pickled foods) will have a longer shelf life if refrigerated. Most condiments will have a warning to refrigerate after opening on the label.
- When buying foods always check the expiration date. Choose the date farthest in the future for optimum shelf life.
- Like the grocery, rotate your stock at home. Rather than trying to determine the codes on cans, use a marker to write the purchase date on cans and packaged goods.
- Whatever the expiration date, do not open or use cans that are bulging or oozing from the seams, or those that are heavily dented.
- Most baking mixes contain fats which will become rancid with time and leaveners that lose their potency. Check the dates.
- The best storage temperature for canned foods is 65 degrees F. Higher storage temperatures can reduce shelf-life up to 50 percent. Most canned goods can be stored up to 1 year under optimal temperatures.
- Canned foods should never be frozen. The freezing expansion can split the seams of the can or break the glass.
- Generally, foods canned in glass have a longer shelf-life, but they must be stored in the dark since light can accelerate some natural chemical reactions.
- Look at cellophane, plastic and box packages at the store to be sure they have not been punctured or torn. Once the seal is penetrated, shelf-life of the contents is drastically shortened.
- Bring food home quickly from the store and store it properly for maximum shelf life.

- Trust your vision and smell- if it looks and/or smells bad throw it out.
- A resource available for consumers online with questions about how to keep perishable foods is: The FoodKeeper App
(<https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/foodkeeperapp/index.html>)

Resources:

www.fsis.usda.gov

www.nrdc.org/food/expiration-dates.asp

www.urbanext.illinois.edu/thrifyliving/tl-foodfreshness.html

http://www.onthetable.net/freshness_dates.html

<http://www.nutrition411.com/patient-education-materials/food-safety/>

Article by: Sherry Gray, MPH, RD, Extension Educator, [UConn EFNEP](#)

Updated: September 30, 2019