

What does "Best if Used By" really mean? Does it indicate that the product will be unsafe to use after that date? Use this study guide to answer these and other questions about product dating.

What is Food Product Dating?

- Two types of product dating may be on a product label:
 - "Open Dating" - Calendar date applied to a food product by manufacturer or retailer.
 - Provides consumers with estimated time period product will be best quality
 - Helps store determine how long to display product for sale.
 - "Closed Dating" - Code consisting of a series of letters and/or numbers applied by manufacturers to identify date and time of production.

Does Federal Law Require Food Product Dating?

- Except for infant formula, product dating is not required by Federal regulations.
- 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 labeled in a manner that is truthful, not misleading, and in compliance with FSIS regulations.
 - To comply, a calendar date must express both the month and day of the month.
 - In the case of shelf-stable and frozen products, the year must also be displayed.
 - Additionally, immediately adjacent to the date must be a phrase explaining the meaning of that date such as "Best if Used By."

Are Dates for Food Safety or Food Quality?

Manufacturers provide dating to help consumers and retailers decide when food is of best quality. Except for infant formula, dates are not an indicator of the product's safety and are not required by Federal law.

How Do Manufacturers Determine Quality Dates?

- Factors including the length of time and the temperature at which a food is held during distribution and offered for sale, the characteristics of the food, and the type of packaging will affect how long a product will be of optimum quality. Manufacturers and retailers will consider these factors when determining the date for which the product will be of best quality.
- The quality of perishable products may deteriorate after the date passes; however, such products should still be safe if handled properly. Consumers must evaluate the quality of the product prior to its consumption to determine if the product shows signs of spoilage.

What Date-Labeling Phrases are Used?

- There are no uniform or universally accepted descriptions used on food labels for open dating in the United States. As a result, there are a wide variety of phrases used on labels to describe quality dates.
- Examples of commonly used phrases:
 - A "Best if Used By/Before" date indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
 - A "Sell-By" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale for inventory management. It is not a safety date.
 - A "Use-By" date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date except for when used on infant formula as described below.
 - A "Freeze-By" date indicates when a product should be frozen to maintain peak quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- USDA estimates that 30 percent of the food supply is lost or wasted at the retail and consumer levels. One source of food waste arises from consumers or retailers throwing away wholesome food because of confusion about the meaning of dates displayed on the label.
- To reduce consumer confusion and wasted food, FSIS recommends that food manufacturers and retailers that apply product dating use a "Best if Used By" date.
- Research shows that this phrase conveys to consumers that the product will be of best quality if used by the calendar date shown.
- Foods not exhibiting signs of spoilage should be wholesome and may be sold, purchased, donated and consumed beyond the labeled "Best if Used By" date.

What Do the Dates on Egg Cartons Mean?

Use of either a "Sell-By" or "Expiration" (EXP) date is not a Federal regulation, but may be required, as defined by the egg laws in the state where the eggs are marketed. Some state egg laws do not allow the use of a "sell-by" date. Egg cartons with the USDA grade shield on them must display the "pack date" (the day that the eggs were washed, graded, and placed in the carton). This number is a three-digit code that represents the consecutive day of the year starting with January 1 as 001 and ending with December 31 as 365. When a "sell-by" date appears on a carton bearing the USDA grade shield, the code date may not exceed 30 days from the date of pack. Store eggs in original carton in coldest part

Vocabulary to Know

- Opening Dating
- Closed Dating
- FSIS
- Best if Used By (or before)
- Sell-by
- Use-by
- Freeze-by
- Pathogenic
- Spoilage
- Can Codes
- Bar Codes
- UPC
- SKU
- Egg Labeling

Are Foods Safe to Eat after the Date Passes?

With an exception of infant formula if the date passes during home storage, a product should still be safe and wholesome if handled properly until the time spoilage is evident. Spoiled foods will develop an off odor, flavor or texture due to naturally occurring spoilage bacteria. If a food has developed such spoilage characteristics, it should not be eaten.

Microorganisms such as molds, yeasts, and bacteria can multiply and cause food to spoil. Viruses are not capable of growing in food and do not cause spoilage. There are two types of bacteria that can be found on food:

- pathogenic bacteria, which cause foodborne illness, and
- spoilage bacteria, which do not cause illness but do cause foods to deteriorate and develop unpleasant characteristics such as an undesirable taste or odor making the food not wholesome.
 - When spoilage bacteria have nutrients (food), moisture, time, and favorable temperatures, these conditions will allow the bacteria to grow rapidly and affect the quality of the food.
 - Food spoilage can occur much faster if food is not stored or handled properly.
 - A change in the color of meat or poultry is not an indicator of spoilage.

Infant Formula

- Federal regulations require a "Use-By" date on the product label of infant formula under inspection of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).
- Consumption by this date ensures the formula contains not less than the quantity of each nutrient as described on the label.
 - Formula must maintain an acceptable quality to pass through an ordinary bottle nipple.
- The "Use-By" date is selected by the manufacturer, packer or distributor of the product on the basis of product analysis throughout its shelf life, tests, or other information.
 - It is also based on the conditions of handling, storage, preparation, and use printed on the label.
- Do not buy or use baby formula after its "Use-By" date.

What Do Can Codes Mean

Can codes are a type of closed dating which enable the tracking of product in interstate commerce. These codes enable manufacturers to rotate their stock and locate their products in the event of a recall.

- Can codes appear as a series of letters and/or numbers and refer to the date the product was canned. The codes are not meant for the consumer to interpret as a "Best if Used By" date.
- Cans must exhibit a code or the date of canning. Cans may also display "open" or calendar dates. Usually these are "Best if Used By" dates for peak quality.
- Discard cans that are dented, rusted, or swollen.
- High-acid canned foods (e.g. tomatoes and fruits) will keep their best quality for 12 to 18 months. Whereas, low-acid canned foods (e.g. meats and vegetables) will keep for two to five years.

Can Food Be Donated After the Date Passes?

Yes. The quality of perishable products may deteriorate after the date passes but the products should still be wholesome if not exhibiting signs of spoilage. Food banks, other charitable organizations, and consumers should evaluate the quality of the product prior to its distribution and consumption to determine whether there are noticeable changes in wholesomeness

Why Are There Bar Codes on Food Packages?

A Universal Product Code (UPC) is a type of barcode that appears on packages as black lines of varying widths above a series of numbers. They are not required by regulation, but manufacturers print them on most product labels because scanners at supermarkets can "read" them quickly to record the price at checkout. UPC codes are also used by stores and manufacturers for inventory purposes and marketing information. When read by a computer, a UPC can reveal such specific information as the manufacturer's name, product name, size of product and price. The numbers are not used to identify recalled products.

A Stock Keeping Unit (SKU) code is a number assigned to a product by a company or retailer for stock-keeping purposes and internal operations. A particular product may have different SKUs if sold by different companies or retailers.