

Food Product Dating

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"Best if Used By" is a type of date you might find on a meat, poultry, or egg product label. Are dates required on these food products? Does it mean the product will be unsafe to use after that date? Here is some background information answering these and other questions about product dating.

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What is Food Product Dating?

Two types of product dating may be shown on a product label. "Open Dating" is a calendar date applied to a food product by the manufacturer or retailer. The calendar date provides consumers with information on the estimated period of time for which the product will be of best quality and to help the store determine how long to display the product for sale. "Closed Dating" is a code that consists of a series of letters and/or numbers applied by manufacturers to identify the date and time of production.

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Does Federal Law Require Food Product Dating?

Except for infant formula, product dating is not required by Federal regulations.¹

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 and not misleading and in compliance with FSIS regulations². 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."

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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.

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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.

For example, sausage formulated with certain ingredients used to preserve the quality of the product or fresh beef packaged in a modified atmosphere packaging system that helps ensure that the product will stay fresh for as long as possible. These products will typically maintain product quality for a longer period of time because of how the products are formulated or packaged.

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.

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What Types of Food are Dated?

Open dating is found on most foods including meat, poultry, egg and dairy products. "Closed or coded dates" are a series of letters and/or numbers and typically appear on shelf-stable products such as cans and boxes of food.

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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.

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What Date-Labeling Phrase does FSIS Recommend?

USDA estimates that 30 percent of the food supply is lost or wasted at the retail and consumer levels³. 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.

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Are Foods Safe to Eat After the Date Passes?

With an exception of infant formula (described below), if the date passes during home storage, a product should still be safe and wholesome if handled properly until the time spoilage is evident ([Chill Refrigerate Promptly](#)). 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 ([The Color of Meat and Poultry](#)).

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What are the Requirements for Dating 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.

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What Do Can Codes Mean?

Can codes are a type of closed dating which enable the tracking of product in interstate commerce. These codes also 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. Additional information on food canning and the handling of canned foods may be found at [Shelf-Stable Food Safety](#).

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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 ([Food Donation Safety Tips](#)).

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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.

Many eggs reach stores only a few days after the hen lays them. 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.

After purchasing eggs, it is recommended to refrigerate them in their original carton and place them in the coldest part of the refrigerator, not in the door due to loss of coolness from repeated opening of the door.

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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.

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How does Date Labeling Impact Food Waste?

Confusion over the meaning of dates applied to food products can result in consumers discarding wholesome food.

In an effort to reduce food waste, it is important that consumers understand that the dates applied to food are for quality and not for safety. Food products are safe to consume past the date on the label, and regardless of the date, consumers should evaluate the quality of the food product prior to its consumption.

Where can I find Information on the Proper Handling of Food?

If foods are mishandled, before or after the date on the package, bacteria, including pathogenic bacteria that can cause foodborne illness, can quickly multiply. For example, if cold chicken salad is taken to a picnic and left out at temperatures higher than 40°F (4.4°C) for more than two hours (one hour if temperatures are 90 °F (32.2 °C) or higher), the product should not be consumed. Other examples of potential mishandling are meat and poultry products that have been defrosted improperly or handled by people who don't practice good sanitation. Make sure to follow the handling and preparation instructions on the label to ensure top quality and safety. Additional information on safe food handling practices in the home can be found at [Check Your Steps: Food Safe Families](#) and [The Big Thaw](#).

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Food Safety Questions?

- Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline toll-free at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)
- The Hotline is open year-round and can be reached from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Eastern Time) Monday through Friday.
- E-mail questions to MPHotline@usda.gov.
- Consumers with food safety questions can also "Ask Karen," the FSIS virtual representative. Available 24/7 at AskKaren.gov .

¹ The U.S. Food and Drug Administration requires a "use by" date on infant formula. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) does not require quality or food safety date labels for products under its purview. However, the USDA does require a "pack date" for poultry products and thermally processed, commercially sterile products to help identify product lots and facilitate trace-back activities in the event of an outbreak of foodborne illness (see 9 CFR 381.126 and 431.2(e), respectively).

² 9 CFR 317.8, 381.129, and 590.411

³<http://www.usda.gov/oce/foodwaste/sources.htm>

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