


Food “Expiration” Dates

Food “expiration” dates don’t mean as much as many people think. Most food is still edible and safe after the “expiration” date but may not be at peak freshness or flavor. The information discussed below will help guide consumers on the various terms used with food product labeling to determine what they mean and what is legally required.



What do the dates mean?

Two different dates may be shown on a product label

“Open Dating” is a date applied to a food product by the manufacturer or retailer to help consumers and retailers decide when food is of best quality and to help the store determine how long to display the product for sale. Open dating is found on most foods including meat, poultry, egg and dairy products.

“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. Closed dates typically appear on shelf-stable products such as cans and boxes of food and help trace and rotate inventories properly. If there is a problem with a particular lot, it can be more easily removed from sale.

Are Dates for Food Safety or Quality?

Manufacturers provide dating to help consumers and retailers decide when food is of best quality. Dates are not an indicator of the product’s safety and are not required by Federal law*.

Is food safe after the date passes?

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. 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.

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.

BEST IF USED BY:

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“Best if Used By/Before” indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

APR 04 15:56 06499 PT6 F2 1B
SELL BY

“Sell-By” date tells the store how long to display the product for sale and is used for stock rotation. It is not a safety date.

USE BY:

25APR11B1

“Use-By” date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date*.

*Infant Formula Dating

Federal regulations require a "Use-By" date on the product label of infant formula. 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. California law prohibits the sale of infant formula past its labeled "use-by" date. **Do not buy or use baby formula after its "Use- By" date.**



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If foods are mishandled before or after the date on the package, bacteria, including pathogenic bacteria that can cause foodborne illness, can multiply quickly. Poor food handling practices include improper temperature control, improper defrosting of meat and food handled by people who do not maintain good hygiene.

Proper Food Handling

Food Donations and Food Waste

Confusion or misinterpretation of the date labels on foods is a key factor leading to food waste in American homes and as a result, up to 90% of consumers discard some foods prematurely. Food is the single most prevalent item in California's waste stream, with over 5.5 million tons of food dumped in landfills every year in the state, costing consumers and industry \$162 billion each year nationally.

Reducing food losses by just 15% would save enough food to feed more than 25 million Americans every year. According to estimates, more than 6 million Californians, including 1 in 4 children, suffer from food insecurity. The quality of perishable products may decrease after the printed date passes, but the products should still be wholesome if not showing 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.

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 may be safe to consume past the date on the label, but regardless of the date, consumers should evaluate the quality of the food product prior to its consumption*.

