



FOOD SAFETY UPDATE

Food Product Dating

We all have questions about food product dating. Many consumers wonder what the date printed on the food product means. Some assume that the product is "spoiled" and therefore toxic, if consumed after the date shown.

This newsletter will help to answer questions and give some background information concerning the dating process.

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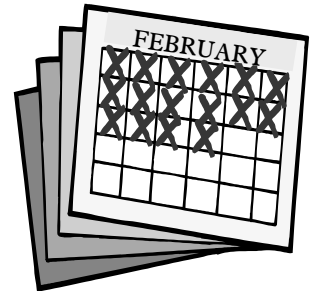
What is Dating?

"Open Dating" (use of a calendar date as opposed to a code) on a food product is a date stamped on a product's package to help the store determine how long to display the product for sale.

If a calendar date is used, it must express both the month and the day of the month, (and the year, in the case of shelf-stable and frozen products), along with a phrase of explanation, such as "sell by" or "use before". This date can also help the purchaser to know the

time limit to purchase or use the product for its best quality. *It is not a safety date.*

Open dating is used primarily for perishable foods, such as meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products. Closed or coded dating might appear on shelf-stable food products such as cans and boxes of food.



Is Dating Required by Federal Law?

With the exception of infant formula and some baby food, product dating is not required by Federal regulations. There is no universally accepted system used for food dating in the United States. Although dating of some

foods is required by more than 20 states, there are areas of the country where much of the food supply has some type of open date and other areas of the country where almost no food is dated.

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Types of Dates

- **"Sell-By"** date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires.
- **"Best if Used By (or Before)"** date is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- **"Use-By"** date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date. The date has been determined by the manufacturer of the product.
- **"Closed or coded dates"** are packing numbers for use by the manufacturer.

Safety After Date Expires

Except for "use-by" dates, product dates don't always refer to optimal home storage and use after purchase. Even when the date expires during home storage, the product should be safe, wholesome, and of good quality if handled properly and kept at a constant temperature of 40° or below.

Once perishable foods are frozen, it does not matter if the date expires because foods kept frozen continuously are safe beyond recommended storage time. However, quality does deteriorate.

Foods generally develop an off odor, flavor, or appearance due to spoilage bacteria. If a food has developed such characteristics, you should discard it as soon as possible.

If foods are mishandled, however, foodborne bacteria can grow and cause foodborne illness before or after the date printed on the package. An example of this would be a carton of milk left on the counter for several hours. It would be unsafe for use, regardless of the date.

Mishandling of food also encompasses defrosted or prepared food that has been left out at room temperature for more than two hours, cross-contaminated foods, and food handled by people who do not practice the proper sanitary measures.

See page 3 for storage safety guidelines.

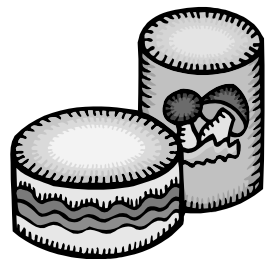
What Do Can Codes Mean?

Cans must display a packing code that enables tracking of the product in interstate commerce. This allows manufacturers to rotate their stock as well as to locate their products in the event of a recall.

These codes, which appear as a series of letters and/or numbers, might refer to the date or time of manufacture. They aren't meant to be "use-by" dates, although some cans do display calendar dates in addition to the coding. These

dates usually signify peak quality.

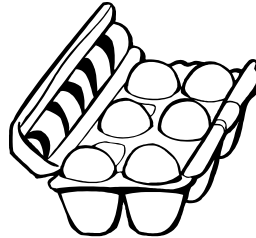
In general, high-acid canned foods such as tomatoes, grapefruit, and pineapple can be stored on the shelf 12 to 18 months; low-acid canned foods such as meat, poultry, fish and most vegetables will keep 2 to 5 years if the can remains in good condition and has been stored in a cool, clean, dry place.



Dates on Egg Cartons

If the egg carton has an expiration date printed on it, such as "EXP May 1," be sure that the date has not passed when the eggs are purchased. That is the last day the store may sell the eggs as fresh.

On eggs which have a Federal grade mark, such as Grade AA, the



date cannot be more than 30 days from the date the eggs were packed into the carton.

As long as you purchase a carton of eggs before the date expires and follow food safety storage guidelines, you should be able to use all the eggs safely in three to five weeks after the date you purchase them.

Storage Guidelines

Since product dates aren't a guide for safe use of a product, how long can the consumer store food and still use it at top quality? For safety purposes, follow these tips:

- Purchase the product before the date expires.
- If perishable, take the food home immediately after purchase and refrigerate it promptly. Freeze it if you can't use it in a timely manor.
- Once a perishable product is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires because foods kept frozen continuously are safe beyond recommended storage time. Keep in mind quality will deteriorate.
- Follow handling recommendations on product.

For additional food safety information about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-674-6854

Refrigerator Home Safety of Fresh or Uncooked Products	Refrigerator Home Storage of Processed Products at Plant
Poultry 1 to 2 days	Cooked Poultry 3 to 4 days
Beef, Veal, Pork, and Lamb 3 to 5 days	Cooked Sausage 3 to 4 days
Ground Meat and Ground Poultry 1 to 2 days	Sausage, Hard/Dry, shelf-stable 6 weeks/pantry
Fresh Variety Meats (Liver, Tongue, etc.) 1 to 2 days	Corned Beef, uncooked in pouch w/pickling juices 5 to 7 days
Cured Ham, Cooked-Before-Eating 5 to 7 days	Vacuum Packed Dinners, w/USDA seal 2 weeks
Sausage from Pork, Beef or Turkey, uncooked 1 to 2 days	Bacon, Hotdogs, Lunch Meats 2 weeks
Eggs 3 to 5 weeks	Ham, fully cooked 7 days
	Ham, canned, labeled "keep" 9 months
	Canned Meat and Poultry 2 to 5 years/pantry