



NEWS RELEASE

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Decoding Food Product Dates

When was the last time you cleaned a cupboard, refrigerator or freezer and tried to remember when you bought a food buried in the back? Except for infant formula and some baby food, food product labeling is not required by federal government regulations.

Here are some tips to help decide whether to eat the food. In some cases the food still may be safe; but the quality no longer may be what you want.

Open dating of a food product is a date stamped on a product's package to help the store know when to pull these foods from shelves. It is used mainly on perishable foods such as meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products. It can help you to know the time limit to purchase or use the product at its best quality. If a calendar date is shown, immediately next to the date must be a phrase explaining the meaning of that date such as "sell by" or "use before." It is not a safety date.

A "Sell-By" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires. How long the food is safe to eat and/or maintains a high quality after this date depends on the food.

A "Best if Used By" (or Before) date is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date. The best policy is to use the product by this date.

A "Use-By" date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. The manufacturer of the product has determined the date.

"Closed or coded dates" are packing numbers for use by the manufacturer. It might appear on shelf-stable products such as cans and boxes of food. Cans must exhibit a packing code to enable tracking of the product in interstate commerce. This enables manufacturers to rotate their stock as well as to locate their products in the event of a recall. These codes aren't meant for the consumer to interpret as "use-by" dates.

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.

Following are some tips to tell you how long you can store the food and still use it at the top quality:

1. Read labels carefully when purchasing food for usage dates.
2. Keep a permanent marker pen in your kitchen and on the food container put the date, month, and year when you purchased the food.
3. Practice "first in, first out" for foods.
4. If you tossed portions of expired foods, buy a smaller container or fewer packages next time.
5. If you cannot use a perishable food by the expiration date, freeze it. A food frozen at 0 F will be safe indefinitely although it will decrease in quality with time.