

FOCUS ON: Food Product Dating

"Sell by Feb 14" is a type of information you might find on a meat or poultry product. Are dates required on food products? Does it mean the product will be unsafe to use after that date? Here is some background information which answers these and other questions about product dating.



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. It can also help the purchaser to know the time limit to purchase or use the product at its best quality. *It is not a safety date.*

Is Dating Required by Federal Law?

Except for infant formula and some baby food (see below), *product dating is not required by Federal regulations.* However, if a calendar date is used, it must express both the month and day of the month (and the year, in the case of shelf-stable and frozen products). If a calendar date is shown, immediately adjacent to the date *must be* a phrase explaining the meaning of that date such as "sell by" or "use before."

There is no uniform or 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 where almost no food is dated.

What Types of Food Are Dated?

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

Types of Dates

- A "Sell-By" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale.
- A "Best if Used By (or Before)" date is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- A "Use-By" date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. 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

Even if the date expires during home storage, a product should be safe, wholesome and of good quality -- if handled properly and kept at 40° F or below. Foods can develop an off odor, flavor or appearance due to spoilage bacteria. If a food has developed such characteristics, you should not use it for **quality** reasons.

If foods are mishandled, however, foodborne bacteria can grow and cause foodborne illness -- before or after the date on the package. For example, if hot dogs are taken to a picnic and left out several hours, they wouldn't be safe if used thereafter, even if the date hasn't expired.

Other examples of potential mishandling are products that have been: defrosted at room temperature more than two hours; cross contaminated; or handled by people who don't use proper sanitary practices. Make sure to follow the handling and preparation instructions on the label to ensure top quality and safety.

Dating Formula and Baby Food

Federal regulations require a use-by date on the product label of infant formula and the varieties of baby food under FDA inspection. If consumed by that date, the formula or food must contain not less than the quantity of each nutrient as described on the label. If stored too long, formula can separate and clog the nipple.

Dating of baby food is for quality as well as for nutrient retention. 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 or baby food after its use-by date.

What Do Can Codes Mean?

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, which appear as a series of letters and/or numbers, might refer to the date or time of manufacture. They aren't meant for the consumer to interpret as "use-by" dates.

Cans may also display "open" or calendar dates. Usually these are "best if used by" dates for 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 grademark, 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, you should be able to use all the eggs safely in three to five weeks after the date *you purchase* them.

Storage Times

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

- If perishable, take the food home immediately after purchase and refrigerate it promptly. Freeze it if you can't use it within times recommended on chart.
- **Once a perishable product is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires because foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely.**
- Follow handling recommendations on product.

Source: Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is the public health agency in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Document developed by a consultant dietitian for the NYS Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program. For further information contact The Regional Food Bank of Northeastern New York, 965 Albany Shaker Road, Latham, New York 12110. (2005)