



University of Nevada  
Cooperative Extension

## Fact Sheet-09-11

# Food Product Dating

Mary Wilson, M.S., R.D., Area Extension Nutrition Specialist  
University of Nevada Cooperative Extension

Many consumers incorrectly assume that a date stamped on a product's package is an expiration date. They automatically throw it out once that date arrives, thinking the food is unsafe to use. This is not true. **Most dates on food products are not meant for safety but for quality.**

### Types of dates and what they mean

If a calendar date is shown on a product, federal regulations do require that a phrase explaining its meaning be printed immediately adjacent to the date. These phrases are "sell-by," "use-by" and "best if used by (or before)." "Closed" or "coded" dating might appear on shelf-stable products such as cans and boxes of food.

### "Sell-By"

A "Sell-By" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. It guides the rotation of shelf stock and allows time for the product to be stored and used at home. The date is quality driven, not a food safety

concern. You should purchase these products by the "Sell By" date.

Examples of commodity foods with "Sell-By" dates include:

Milk

Eggs

Yogurt

Vacuum packed meats



### How long is a food good past the "Sell-By" date?

It depends on the type of food. The items that cause the most concern among shoppers include dairy products, eggs, meat and poultry. Let's take a look at each product or category of products separately.

**Milk:** A "sell-by" date is normally stamped on every carton. Make sure you purchase the milk before this date. Take it straight home and refrigerate immediately at 40 degrees or lower. Don't leave it in the trunk of your car while you squeeze in a few more errands on the way home, and don't let it linger on the counter or table during a meal. Pour the servings you need and return the carton to the refrigerator promptly. Under optimum conditions, milk should remain fresh up to 5 to 7 days beyond the "sell-by" date.

**Yogurt:** Most yogurts will be stamped with either a "sell-by" or a "best if used -by" date. Store yogurts in the same manner as fresh milk (refrigerated at 40 degrees or lower) and use by the "best if used-by" date for highest quality.

After that date you might see some separation of fluid in the product which will affect its appearance, but this factor alone is not an indicator of spoilage. It may be perfectly fine once it is stirred. Trust your own sense of taste and smell, plus your personal knowledge of how well it has been cared for since you purchased it when deciding to use it or toss it. Yogurts stored under optimum conditions can be expected to be of good quality and freshness 7 to 10 days beyond the "sell-by" date.

**Eggs:** Egg cartons will normally be stamped with a "sell-by" date. At home, refrigerate the eggs in their original carton. It is designed to keep the porous shells from absorbing odors from other foods and to protect the eggs from breaking. Eggs have a very long shelf life. Properly refrigerated, they can be expected to maintain reasonable quality for 3 to 5 weeks beyond the "sell-by" date. If you purchase federally graded eggs, they will display an expiration date and can be used safely 3 to 5 weeks beyond that date.



**Meat and Poultry:** Vacuum packed meats sold in supermarkets carry both a "sell-by" and a "use-by" date.

Purchase these meats before the "sell-by" date, keep them refrigerated properly and either use or freeze by the "use-by" date.

Tray-packed fresh meats and poultry are normally stamped with a "sell-by" and "use-by" date. Recommendations for handling and storage of vacuum packed meats also apply to these products. Once a perishable product such as meat or poultry is frozen, these dates become irrelevant because, according to USDA experts, foods kept frozen continuously (at 0

degrees F or below) can be safe indefinitely.

### “Best if Used By”

A "Best if Used By (or Before)" date is a recommendation for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date. Examples of commodity foods with “Best if Used By” dates include:

- Peanut Butter
- Canned milk
- Powdered milk
- Some canned food



Peanut butter has a “Best By” date.

### “Use-By”

A "Use-By" date is the last date recommended for use of the product while at peak quality. Other names also used include “Better if used by” and “Better before”. A “Use By” date is often placed on non-perishable or shelf stable foods like cereal. While product may decline in flavor and quality, food should be safe after that date. This date is determined by the manufacturer based on analysis of the product throughout its shelf life.

### “Expiration dates”

For most foods, an expiration date means the last date on which the product should be eaten or used. Eggs are the exception. If you buy federally graded eggs before the expiration date, you should be able to use them safely for the next 3 to 5 weeks.

“Closed or coded dates” are packing numbers for use by the manufacturer. Many commodity foods products are labeled with “closed” or “coded dates”. Examples include:

- Canned juices, vegetables and fruits
- Reduced Fat American Cheese
- Pasta like macaroni and spaghetti
- Dried beans
- Rice



Macaroni has a coded date.



Reduced Fat American Cheese has a coded 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. There is no book which tells how to translate the codes into dates. Cans may also display "open" or calendar dates. Usually, these are "best if used by" dates for peak quality.



## How long are canned foods good for?

In general, high-acid canned foods such as tomatoes, fruit juice and pineapple can be stored on the shelf for 12 to 18 months. Low-acid foods such as canned meats, poultry, fish and most canned vegetables will keep for 2 to 5 years, as long as the can is in good condition and has been stored in a cool, clean, dry place. Never use food from leaking, bulging, rusting or badly dented cans.

## 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 Food and Drug Administration inspection. Dating of baby food is for quality as well as nutrient retention. Do not buy or use baby formula or baby food after its “use by” date.

## Practice safe-food handling at home

When you bring food home, it's up to you to care for it properly until consumed. To answer the "Is this stuff still good?" question with confidence, practice these four rules at your house:

- 1) Purchase fresh-dated products before the "sell-by" date.
- 2) Refrigerate perishable products promptly and use or freeze meat and poultry products before the "use-by" date.
- 3) Remember that product dating is a guide for quality, rather than safety.
- 4) These rules do not apply to infant formula and baby food which should not be used after the "use-by" date.

Adapted from “Food Product Dating” by the Food Safety and Inspection Service at [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov).

Brand names are used for illustration purposes only and do not constitute an endorsement by Cooperative Extension.

This material was funded by USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

An EEO/AA institution

Copyright © 2009, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension.