

## Dates on Food Products

Dates on food labels help you judge how long the product will be at top quality (good flavor, texture, odor and nutritional value). The federal government only requires labeling on infant formula and some baby food. More than 20 states have their own food dating regulations.

Open dating (use of a calendar date instead of a code) is found on many foods. There isn't a uniform standard for putting this information on labels, however. This wording is often used:

**"Sell-By"** dates tell the store how long to offer the product for sale. For best quality, you should buy the food before that date.

Oregon requires these "pull dates" on perishable foods including eggs in the shell, certain fluid milk and cream products such as yogurt and sour cream, processed or cured meat such as wieners and ham, fresh seafood, ready-to-eat foods such as sandwiches and macaroni salads, and chicken and raw meat. If still good quality, foods with expired dates can be separated and offered for sale as such.

**"Best if Used By (or Before)"** dates estimate how long the product will be have best quality. These dates are sometimes found on foods such as breakfast cereals, soy milk, and biscuit mix, olive oil, yeast, raisins, bread products and gelatin dessert.

**"Use By"** dates are the endpoint of the time when the food is expected to be at peak quality. The manufacturer sets these "expiration dates". Infant formula has a use by date to guarantee maximum nutritional value and quality. Sliced ham, hot dogs and bacon may have use by dates.

**Tips for Using Foods with Expired Dates** - Foods with "Sell-by" and "Best if Used by" dates can usually be stored for a short time at home after those dates.

**Non-perishable foods** (such as breakfast cereal and gelatin dessert)  
The texture and flavor of non-perishable foods will begin to decline after the date listed. (For example, cereals might turn stale.) They are safe to eat.

**Perishable foods** (such as milk, eggs, meat)  
If perishable foods have been refrigerated at the proper temperature (40°F or below), they will still be safe to eat after the date listed. However, quality will begin to decline. (For example, milk may develop an off-flavor.) Don't use foods that show signs of spoilage such as mold.

- Milk can develop an off flavor after the date on the carton.
- Although eggs can usually be stored for three to five weeks after purchase, but it's best to use them in cooked dishes because quality begins to decline (such as thinning of the egg white).
- Deli meats should be cooked until steaming if held after the sell-by date as a food safety precaution.

If perishable foods won't be used soon, freeze them to maintain freshness if they freeze well.

Developed by Carolyn Raab, Extension Foods and Nutrition Specialist, October 2004