

Is It Still Good? Understanding Label Dates

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If you find yourself confused by the different types of dates found on food items, you're not alone. You might see several phrases to describe food label dates on food packages, such as "sell by" or "best if used by." Use this guide to help you understand dates on food labels and to determine if a food is still safe to eat.

Varieties of Food Label Dates

- "Sell by" – this date indicates the store to display and/or sell the product by that date
- "Best if used by (or before)" – this date indicates when the food will have the best flavor or quality
- "Use by" – this date indicates the last date that the food will be at its highest quality
- "Freeze by" – this date indicates when the food must be frozen to maintain its highest quality

These dates are set by manufacturers and often do not inform consumers about the safety of a product or if it has harmful germs. The dates are suggestions for consumers and food retailers on when a product is at its best quality. The only exception to this is the "Use by" dates on infant formula. Federal regulations require "use by" dates on all infant formulas, and you should not buy or use this product after the "use by" date has passed.

If you find food items that are past these quality dates, think about the type of food, whether it shows any signs of spoilage and if there are different ways to store the food item to extend its shelf life. For some perishable foods, freezing may be an easy option for later use. Most dry goods and pantry items remain safe for a long time, as long as there are no signs of spoilage, packaging damage or other issues.



Food Storage Tips

- Freeze perishable foods before the expiration date if you can't use them right away. Once it's frozen, it's okay to freeze and eat after the expiration date as long as it's below 0 F.
- After thawing food from the freezer, use within one to two days.
- Freezing food can keep it safe for years, but the quality may not be the best after a certain amount of time.

There are some perishable food items with special consideration when checking dates. Below are common foods that can have confusing expiration dates.

Milk:

- Milk usually has a “sell by” date, so make sure to buy it before this date.
- After grocery shopping and on the way home, store milk and other dairy products in a cooler, especially on hot days. When you come home from the store, put them back in the refrigerator right away.
- Do not leave milk products out on the counter during meals or cooking. Keep them refrigerated at all times.
- Pasteurized milk is safe in the refrigerator for about 7 to 14 days.
- Ultra-high temperature processed milk, also known as shelf-stable milk, can stay in your pantry for up to 90 days. However, once you open it, store it in the refrigerator, where it stays safe for about seven to 14 days.

Eggs:

- Keep eggs in the refrigerator, placing them in the coldest part, usually near the back.
- Store eggs in their original container.
- Avoid putting eggs in the refrigerator door, as they can lose the right temperature when the door is opened frequently.
- You can usually buy eggs in stores for three to five weeks beyond the date printed on the carton.

Bread:

- If you notice green or white mold on your bread, and the date on the packaging hasn’t passed, throw away the entire loaf.
- To keep bread fresh longer, store it in the freezer.
- Store-bought or sliced bread lasts about two to four days on the counter, while bakery-baked bread lasts one to three days. All types of bread can last two to three months in the freezer.

Trust your instincts: If food has mold, a bad smell, leaking or bulging cans or looks spoiled, do not eat it. Throw it out.



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