

# Understanding Dates on Food Packaging

Product dating is not required by federal regulations except on infant formula. Dates are provided to help stores and people know when food is of the best quality. However, the dates are not indicators of the food's safety. Understanding the dates can reduce throwing away perfectly good food.

There are many different dates that can be found on food packaging. Here are some examples:

- ▶ A **"Best if Used By/Before"** date indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
  - ▶ Used for canned, dried and other shelf-stable foods
- ▶ A **"Use-By"** date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date except when used for infant formula as described below.
  - ▶ Used for fresh foods (e.g., meat, yogurt, eggs) and infant formula
- ▶ A **"Sell-By"** date tells the store how long to display the product for sale for inventory management. It is not a safety date.
  - ▶ Used for fresh or prepared foods (e.g., milk, eggs, meats)
- ▶ An **"Expiration"** date is the last date a food should be eaten. Food should be thrown out after this date.
- ▶ A **"Freeze-By"** date indicates when a product should be frozen to maintain peak quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
  - ▶ Used for meat and convenience foods



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## How can you tell if a food is safe to eat?

If handled properly, a product should still be safe and wholesome even if the package date is passed during storage.

- ▶ Spoiled foods will develop an off odor, flavor or texture. These foods should not be consumed.
- ▶ Other signs of spoilage include: Bulging, leaking, rusty or deeply dented cans
- ▶ **Infant formula should NOT be purchased or used after its "Use-By" date.**

Safely handling and storing food is important for shelf life and consumer safety.

- ▶ See the USDA's website for more information:  
<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation>



Here are some general guidelines on how long foods are good past the product dates shown on the packaging:

Shelf-Stable and Canned Goods	Storage on Shelf After Product Date	Storage After Opening
Low-acid canned goods. (e.g., canned meat and poultry, stews, soups except tomato, spaghetti noodles and pasta products, potatoes, corn, carrots, spinach, beans, beets, peas, and pumpkin)	2 to 5 years	3 to 4 days in the refrigerator
High-acid canned goods. (e.g., juices such as tomato, orange, lemon, lime, and grapefruit; tomatoes; grapefruit, pineapple, apples and apple products, mixed fruit, peaches, pears, plums, all berries, pickles, sauerkraut, and foods treated with vinegar-based sauces or dressings like German potato salad and sauerbraten)	12 to 18 months	5 to 7 days in the refrigerator
Tuna and other seafood	1 year	1 to 2 days
Rice and dried pasta	2 years	After cooking, 3 to 4 days in the refrigerator
Shelf-stable milk	6 to 12 months	5 to 7 days
Dairy and Eggs	Storage in Refrigerator After Product Date	Storage After Opening
Milk, fresh liquid	5 to 7 days	3 to 5 days
Yogurt	1 to 2 weeks	1 to 2 weeks in the refrigerator
Hard cheese (e.g., cheddar, Swiss, parmesan)	6 months	3 to 4 weeks in the refrigerator
Soft cheese (e.g., ricotta, cottage, brie)	2 weeks	1 week in the refrigerator
Egg substitute	1 week	3 days in the refrigerator
Eggs (liquid, not in shell)	2 to 4 days	2 to 4 days in the refrigerator
Eggs (in the shell)	3 to 5 weeks	N/A
Meat and Poultry	Storage in Refrigerator After Product Date	Storage in Freezer
Ground meat	1 to 2 days	4 months
Beef, veal, lamb or pork	3 to 5 days	Up to 12 months
Poultry	1 to 2 days	Up to 12 months

<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/food-product-dating>