COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE & LIFE SCIENCES
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Food Product Dating and Storage Times

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Check the Date

Nutritious food is an important part of our individual health and wellness. One way to ensure your food is nutritious is to check the date on packages. The date is a guideline to help consumers use food when it is at its peak quality or before spoilage begins. Proper storage conditions and times are also essential in keeping healthy food safe to consume.

State's Choice

With the exception of infant formula, Federal regulations do not require product dating, so individual states decide whether to use them.[1]

If a company does use "open dating" on a food product, the date must show a month, day, and year for shelf-stable and frozen products, as well as an explanatory phrase to indicate the meaning of the date such as "use by" "sell by" or "best by."

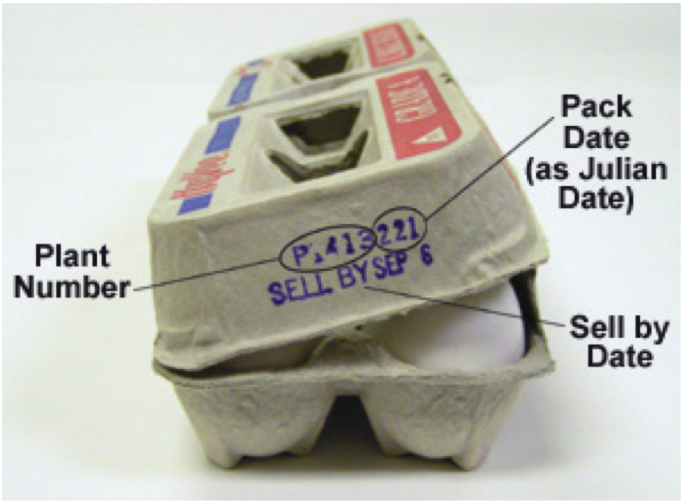
Food Product Date Types

"Open dating" refers to an actual calendar date instead of a coded date created by the manufacturer.[1] Open Dating is found mainly on packages of perishable foods such as meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products. The date helps store employees know when to pull these foods off the shelf. It can also benefit consumers by letting them know when a product is at its best quality. However, this date is not necessarily an indicator of food safety.

Types of Dates:

- **Sell By** – indicates how long the product should be displayed for sale. Consumers should purchase products before the sell by date.
- **Best If Used By** – indicates the date of the product's optimal flavor and quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- **Use By** – indicates the last date of the product's peak quality. It also helps consumers decide when food is no longer safe to eat. This date is determined by the food product manufacturer.

Product dates do not always denote that the food is unsafe.[1] Even if the date on the food product expires during home storage, perishable foods should be safe, nutritious, and of good quality if they are properly stored.



Dates on Egg Cartons

If a "sell by" date such as "SELL BY Nov 5" is printed on an egg carton, be sure the date has not passed when you purchase the eggs. That date is the last day the store may sell the eggs as "fresh." Once eggs are purchased, they can be stored at home, refrigerated, for 3 to 5 weeks. The "sell by" date will most likely expire, but the eggs are completely safe to eat.[1]

The example in the egg carton pictured above shows a Julian date. A Julian date is the number of days past January 1st that the eggs were packed and is for your information.

Dating of Infant Formula and Baby Foods

Federal regulation requires a "use by" date on baby formula for quality as well as nutrient retention.[1] The "use by" date is selected on the basis of product analysis and other tests during the formula's shelf life. The date also is based on the conditions for handling, storage, use and preparation, which are printed on the product label. Consumers should not buy or use infant formula after its "use by" date.

Canned Goods Codes

In order to facilitate the tracking of canned food in interstate commerce, manufacturers give each can a packing code.[1] These codes appear as a series of letters and/or numbers that refer to the date or time of manufacture. They are not meant for consumers to interpret as "use by" dates. Cans typically have a "best-if-used by" date that indicates the product's peak quality.

The USDA states that canned foods are safe indefinitely as long as they are stored in a place that is free from extreme temperatures—freezing and heat above 90°F. The USDA further states that if the can looks normal and is free of dents, rust, and swelling, it should be safe to consume. In general, high-acid canned foods such as tomatoes, grapefruit, pineapple, and other fruits, will maintain their best quality for 12-18 months. Low-acid canned foods such as meat, poultry, fish and most vegetables, will maintain their best quality for 2-5 years.

Storage Times

Because product dates are not a guide for safe use of a product, the following tips can ensure that canned food remains top quality:

- Purchase canned food before the expiration date.
- Store perishable food properly and promptly after purchase.
- The USDA states that once the product is frozen, foods can be kept frozen at 0°F degrees continuously and are safe indefinitely, although quality declines.[1]
- Consumers should always follow handling recommendations on the product.
- If a product has a "use by" date, follow that recommendation.
- If a product has a "sell by" date or no date, cook and/or freeze the product by the times on the following charts.

Processed Product	Unopened, After Purchase	After Opening
Cooked poultry	3 to 4 days	3 to 4 days
Cooked sausage	3 to 4 days	3 to 4 days
Sausage, hard/dry, shelf-stable	6 weeks/ pantry	3 weeks
Corned beef, uncooked, in pouch with pickling juices	5 to 7 days	5 to 7 days
Vacuum-packed dinners, commercial brand with USDA seal	2 weeks	3 to 4 days
Bacon	2 weeks	7 days
Hot dogs	2 weeks*	7 days
Lunch meats	2 weeks*	7 days
Ham, fully cooked	7 days	3 days-slices 7 days-whole
Ham, canned, labeled "keep refrigerated"	9 months	3 to 4 days
Ham, canned, shelf-stable	2 years/ pantry	3 to 5 days
Canned meat and poultry, shelf-stable	2 to 5 years/ pantry	3 to 4 days

*No longer than one week after a "sell by" date.

Refrigerator Home Storage of Fresh or Uncooked Items Held at 40°F or Below[1]	
Product	**Storage Times After Purchase**
Poultry	1 to 2 days
Beef, veal, pork, lamb	3 to 5 days
Ground meat or poultry	1 to 2 days
Cured ham, cook before eating	5 to 7 days
Sausage, uncooked	1 to 2 days
Eggs, raw in shell	3 to 5 weeks

Reference

1. U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2013). http://www.fsis.usda.gov Website. Food Product Dating. http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/wcm/connect/19013cb7-8a4d-474c-8bd7-bda76b9defb3/Food_Product_Dating.pdf?MOD=AJPERES. Accessed November 3, 2014.
2. U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2014) http://fda.gov Website. To Your Health! http://www.fda.gov/Food/FoodborneIllnessContaminants/PeopleAtRisk/ucm182679.htm#storchart. Accessed November 7, 2014.

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