

Food Dating Cypher

FOOD PROTECTION CONNECTION



DEMYSTIFYING FOOD DATE STAMPS

It may come as a surprise to some that there are no federal laws that require date marking of manufactured foods, with the one exception of infant formula and some infant foods. Some states do have stricter and required “sell by” dating for specific foods such as dairy products. This should always be verified with your regulating agency. Neither the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) nor the US Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) preclude the sale of food that is past the expiration date indicated on the label. As a matter of fact, FDA does not even require that manufacturers place an expiration, “sell by,” “best if used by,” or similar message on food products. The use of ‘dating’ on foods is solely voluntary and at the discretion of the manufacturer.

However, if a calendar date is used, it must express both the month and day of the month (and the year, in the case of shelf-stable and frozen products). If a calendar date is shown, immediately adjacent to the date must be a phrase explaining the meaning of that date such as “sell-by” or “use before.”

Foods must be wholesome and fit for consumption according to U.S. food laws. If a food manufacturer chooses to place a “best by,” “use by,” or expiration date on their food, it will not alleviate them from their obligation to produce and sell safe food. Safety is regulated, quality is not.



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OPEN DATING

When we discuss dating of food in this context we are talking about unopened packaged foods from the manufacturer of the food. Most dates on food products are quality dates and are in the form of “open dating.” Open dates are dates, not codes. They are dates a consumer would recognize. These dates are on the product to help food facilities, such as grocery stores, determine how long to display the product for sale for *best quality*. They are also there as an indicator to the purchaser or end user of the product as to the time limits to purchase or use the product at its *best quality*. Food is typically safe long after its marked expiration date as long as it has been handled and stored properly. This form of dating will often be seen on perishable foods such as meats, poultry, eggs, and dairy products. Listed below are what the terms stamped on food products generally mean.

Use-by Date

The last date recommended for the *use* of the product while at peak quality. The date has been determined by the manufacturer.

Recommendation:

The best policy is to use the product by this date.

However, unless verified otherwise by the company, this is a quality date and not a food safety date. The food could very well be safe to consume after the manufacturer’s recommended “use-by” date if the product was stored and handled properly.

Sell-by Date

Advises the store how long to display the product for sale. It is not an expiration date or consume by date. The manufacturer recommends this date so that consumers have adequate time to use the product. This is typically used for perishable food items that will spoil with time. Spoilage is a quality issue, not a food safety issue.

Recommendation:

How long the food is safe to eat and/or maintains a high quality after this date depends on the food. The individual company determines this date based on their own internal studies and testing. If you are interested in knowing more about the safety and freshness of a particular product, there is usually an email or a toll-free number on the product packaging to contact the company. Using the Internet to research a company and their food products to determine

freshness is always an option as well. Once a food is opened, it frequently needs to be used more quickly than it would if it remained unopened. Again, with the exception of infant formula and some baby foods, and potentially dairy in some states, “sell-by” dating is not required and does not necessarily imply lack of safety after that date. As a matter of fact, it is not a “consume by” date. The food can still be served or used after the “sell-by” date, even in the case of dairy products whose dating may be regulated.

Best if Used by (or before) Date

Recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

Recommendation:

If possible, contact the company for more information—see Tip 4 if contact information isn’t given on the food product. The food still may be safe. Yet, who wants to eat (or have their cooking ability judged by) a baked product made from a mix where the leavening ingredients were too old to make the food rise. Or, where the fat in a food—such as nuts—turned rancid over time. One cake company hotline said its cake mix still should

Continued on page 12

taste good for three months past the label date; however, it would be best to discard the accompanying nuts which no longer may be at peak flavor.

CLOSED DATING

Closed or coded dating is the use of letters, numbers, and symbols to create a number for use by the manufacturer for product tracking, recall, complaints, and similar. These are codes the general public would not recognize. They too are quality or tracking dates, not food safety dates. There is no standardized coding system used for foods. Sometimes it takes a call or research on a company to know and understand their coding system. You will often see this form of dating on canned and non-perishable foods. The Canned Food Alliance (www.mealtime.org) provides guidance on deciphering some coding on canned food products.

INFANT FORMULA

If you are working in a daycare or hospital setting where infant formula may be used, it is important to pay close attention to the “use-by” date marked on the product. It is a federal law to require a “use-by” date on infant formula and some types of baby food under inspection by the Food and Drug Administration. Baby formula is dated for both quality and nutrition retention.

DATES ON EGG CARTONS

Use of either a “sell-by” or an “expiration” date on egg cartons is not federally required. Some may be state required, as defined by the egg laws in the state where the eggs are marketed. Some state egg laws do not allow use of a “sell-by” date.

Egg cartons with the USDA grade shield on them must display the “pack date” (the day that the eggs were washed, graded, and placed in the carton). The number is a three-digit code that represents the consecutive day of the year starting with January 1 as 001 and ending with December 31 as 365. When a “sell-by” date appears on a carton bearing the USDA grade shield, the code date may not exceed 45 days from the date of pack. Many eggs reach stores only a few days after the hen lays them.

For best *quality*, use eggs within 3 to 5 weeks of the date you purchase them. The “sell-by” date will usually expire

during that length of time, but the eggs are perfectly safe to use.

SAFETY AFTER A MARKED DATE

“Use-by” dates usually refer to best quality and are not safety dates. But even if the date expires during storage, a product should be safe, wholesome, and of good quality if handled properly and kept at 40°F or below. Both the FDA and FSIS have shelf life recommendation charts available on their websites. Just keep in mind that these are recommendations and in no way imply the food may not still be safe to eat after those recommended time frames.

Can retail stores and foodservice facilities sell, use, or serve foods whose packages are ‘out-of-date’?

Yes, unless otherwise regulated by a more stringent state or local food law, as long as the integrity of the food is intact and the product has not been mishandled, these facilities may use or sell ‘out-of-date’ food (with the exception of infant formula). There is an entire food industry sector that revolves around outdated foods. Salvage dealers or businesses that purchase, recondition, and/or resell foods that are out-of-date

or nearly out-of-date are common in some areas of the country. Though some states do not allow the sale of out-of-date foods, others have recognized that food is still safe beyond the marked date. Salvage operations and food outlet stores are a great way to provide good food at reduced prices. There is no need to throw away foods with out-of-date codes. If the food has been stored and handled safely it is still safe to cook with, serve, and eat. It might not be top-notch quality, but it would not make you sick.

Next time you go into your storage pantry and pull out a can of green beans that has a “use-by” date that is six months past, don’t



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The “sell by” date will usually expire during that length of time, but the eggs are perfectly safe to use.

automatically throw the food out. Stop and consider the product, the integrity of the packaging, the storage and handling methods used, and make an educated decision as to whether to use or throw out the food. Many food facilities have standard operating

procedures (SOPs) that don't allow food to be used or sold after the date marked or a specified time after the marked date. If specified, always follow your company SOPs on out-of-date foods. ■

REFERENCES

- <http://www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/Transparency/Basics/ucm210073.htm>
- <http://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/features/do-food-expiration-dates-matter>
- <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-safety-education/get-answers/food-safety-fact-sheets/food-labeling/food-product-dating/food-product-dating>

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- Which type of date marking is common on perishable foods such as deli salads?
 - Open dating
 - Closed dating
 - "Best if used by" dating
- Which type of date marking is common with non-perishable foods such as canned foods?
 - "Best if used by" dating
 - Open dating
 - Closed dating
- Which of the following is required by federal law?
 - That all meats have "sell-by" dates
 - That all infant formulas have "use-by" dates
 - That all dairy products have "sell-by" dates
- "Best if used by" is
 - For safety and quality
 - Recommended for best flavor or quality
 - For safety only
- "Sell-by" dates
 - Are required for *all* dairy products
 - Advise the store how long to display the product for sale
 - Are *not* required for *any* food products
- "Use-by" dates mean
 - You must eat the food by this date
 - The last date recommended for the *use* of the product while at peak quality
 - Determined by the retail food store
- Unless otherwise regulated by a state or local regulatory agency, can a food facility use or sell outdated food?
 - Yes, if the product was handled and stored properly and its integrity is intact
 - Yes, under any circumstance
 - No, not under any circumstance

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