

FOOD PRODUCT DATING AND STORAGE TIMES



Introduction

Nutritious food is an important part of the health and wellness of an individual. The date on packages of food is a guideline to help consumers use food at its peak quality and before spoilage begins to occur. Also, proper storage conditions and times are essential in achieving healthy food that is safe to consume.

Types of Food Product Dating

“Open Dating” on a food product refers to an actual calendar date instead of a coded date. This type of date is found mainly on perishable foods such as meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products. It helps the store to know when to pull these foods off the shelf. It can also benefit consumers to help determine when a product is at its best quality. It is not a safety date.

With the exception of infant formula and some baby food, product dating is not required by federal regulations. There is also no uniform system used for food dating by manufacturers in the United States. Although dating of some foods is required by more than 20 states, some states do not require any date codes.

“Closed or coded dates” are packing numbers used by the manufacturer identify and locate product if there is a recall. These types of datings are typically found on shelf-stable foods, such as canned and boxed foods.

Dating Terms

- **“Sell-By-Date”**: tells the store how long to display the product for sale. The consumer should buy the product before the date expires.
- **“Best-If-Used-By (or Before) Date”**: recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- **“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.

Except for “use-by-dates”, product dates don’t always refer to home storage or use after purchase. Even if the dates expire during home storage, perishable foods should be safe, wholesome and of good quality if handled properly and kept in the refrigerator or freezer.

Dating of Infant Formula and Baby Foods

Formula and baby food dating is for quality as well as nutrient retention. The “use-by-date” is selected by the manufacturer on the basis of product analysis throughout its shelf life. It is also

based on the conditions of handling, storage, preparation and use printed on the label. Do not buy or use infant formula or baby food after its “use-by-date”.

Can Codes

Canned food must have a packing code to enable tracking of the product in interstate commerce. These codes, which appear as a series of letters and/or numbers, might refer to the date or time of manufacture. They aren’t meant for the consumer to interpret as “use-by” dates. Cans may also display “open” or calendar dates. Usually these are “best-used-by” dates for peak quality.

In general, high acid canned foods, such as tomatoes, grapefruit and pineapple can be stored on the shelf 12-18 months. Low-acid canned foods such as meat, poultry, fish and most vegetables will keep for 2-5 years, if the can remains in good condition and has been stored in a cool, clean, dry place. Normally food from these cans is safe to eat unless there is bulging or leaking.

Dates on Egg Cartons

If the egg carton has an expiration date printed on it, such as “EXP April 1”, be sure that the date has not passed when the eggs are purchased. That is the last day the store may sell the eggs as fresh. On eggs which have federal grademark, such as Grade AA, the date cannot be more than 30 days from the date the eggs were packed in the carton. Eggs can be stored at home, refrigerated, for 3 to 5 weeks if purchase before the expiration date.

Storage Times

Since product dates aren’t a guide for safe use of a product, follow these tips to make sure that food is still top quality.

- Purchase the food before the expiration date.
- For perishable food, take it home immediately after purchase and refrigerate it properly.
- Once the product is frozen, it doesn’t matter if the date expires because foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely.
- Follow handling recommendations on the product.
- Consult the following storage chart.

Refrigerated Home Storage (at 40°F or below) of Fresh or Uncooked Products

- If product has a “use-by-date” follow that date.
- If product has a “sell-by-date” or no date, cook and freeze the product by the times on the following chart.

Product	Storage Times After Purchase
Poultry	1 to 2 days
Beef, veal, pork, lamb	3 to 5 days
Ground Beef or Ground poultry	1 to 2 days
Variety meats (liver, tongue, brain, kidneys, heart, chitterlings)	1 to 2 days
Cured Ham, cook before eating	5 to 7 days
Sausage from pork, beef or turkey, uncooked	1 to 2 days
Eggs	3 to 5 weeks

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Refrigerator Home Storage (at 40° or below) for Processed Products Sealed at the Plant

- If the product has a “use-by-date” , follow that date.
- If the product has a “sell-by-date” or no date, cook or freeze the product by the times on the following chart.

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	3 to 4 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
Lunch meats 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”



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