

Extension Shoppers Guide Article for 10-28-14

Food Product Dating: What do those dates mean?

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Are you confused about the current system of food product dating? We don't want to serve food to our families that is unsafe to eat. But we don't want to waste food if it's still "good" -- of good quality as well as safe to eat. How can we use the different types of dates that appear on food product labels to help us make healthy, affordable decisions? Here are a few tips.

If you are buying infant formula, DO NOT buy or use baby formula after its "use-by" date, for both safety and nutritional reasons. This expiration date is federally regulated.

For all other food products, there is no regulated food dating system that is consistently used across the U.S. USDA does provide these definitions for dates used on foods:

- **"Sell by" date:** Tells the STORE how long to display the product for sale. YOU should buy the product before that date.
- **"Best if used by (or before)" date:** Recommended for best flavor or quality. It is NOT a purchase date or a food safety date.
- **"Use by" date:** Last date recommended by the manufacturer for use of product while at *peak quality*. This date can be your guideline to get that product used.

The dates (listed above) refer to food quality, rather than food safety. These dates can give us a general idea of how long the food has been on the shelf.

Many canned goods are required to have a packing code to help manufacturers rotate their stock and to locate products, if recalled. These codes are NOT meant for "use-by" dates (unless it says clearly "use-by").

How can you keep food safe (and keep you and your family safe)?

If perishable, take the food home immediately after purchase. Refrigerate within at least 2 hours. Freeze it if you can't use it within recommended safe refrigerated storage times.

Store food in the cupboard, refrigerator or freezer at the proper temperature and length of time. Do not leave perishable foods at room temperature for more than 2 hours.

Follow the handling and preparation instructions on the product label. Avoid cross-contamination and ensure proper sanitation. If the product does have visible mold, off odors, or the can is dented at the seams or bulging, this could be a sign that dangerous microorganisms are present. **When in doubt, throw it out!**

For more information, check this link: Safe Food Storage: Refrigerator, Freezer: <http://www.ksre.ksu.edu/bookstore/pubs/MF3130.pdf> Kansas State Research and Extension, 2014.