

What Do Dates on Food Products Mean?

Almost every product you pick up in the grocery store has some kind of date on it. Unfortunately, there isn't a universally accepted food-dating system in the United States, so there is tremendous confusion about what these dates mean. What is the difference between "use by," "sell by," and "best by"? Is the food still safe to eat if it is past the date listed?

The government does not require food manufacturers to print use by dates, sell by dates, and best by dates on food labels. The only exception is infant formula, which must have a "Use by" date based on nutrient content testing. Manufacturers voluntarily print these dates on packages of other foods because consumers want to see them. They are freshness and quality dates, not food safety dates.

The Food and Drug Administration supports "Best if Used By" dates, which indicate the date the food will retain top quality and flavor. It is a freshness date. The food is not necessarily spoiled or unsafe after this date but may have lost some of its freshness and nutritional value. Packaged foods like cereals, snack foods, canned foods, and frozen entrees often have "Use By" or "Best By" dates. You may safely eat foods after these dates if they show no signs of spoilage and you have stored, handled, and prepared them properly.

A "Sell by" date indicates the last recommended day of sale. Fresh meats, dairy products, and breads often have sell by dates. Retail stores should pull products after the sell by date; however, it is legal to sell food after this date. Most food is safe to eat after the sell by date as long as there are no signs of spoilage and the food has been stored, handled, and prepared properly. You should cook fresh meat, fish, and poultry within one to two days after you buy and refrigerate it. You could also freeze the product because once frozen, the date doesn't matter.

Reference:

FDA <https://www.fda.gov/news-events/fda-voices-perspectives-fda-leadership-and-experts/working-food-industry-reduce-confusion-over-date-labels>

Source:

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