

Understanding Date Marking Can Help Reduce Food Waste

For consumers, much food waste results from a misunderstanding of what the various wordings on product date labels mean, along with uncertainty about the storage of perishable foods. Confusion over date labeling accounts for an estimated 20 percent of consumer food waste. Below you will find a series of questions and answers from the USDA website. More information can be found at <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/food-product-dating>

What is Food Product Dating?

Two types of product dating may be shown on a product label. "Open Dating" is a calendar date applied to a food product by the manufacturer or retailer. The calendar date provides consumers with information on the estimated period of time for which the product will be of best quality and to help the store determine how long to display the product for sale. "Closed Dating" is a code that consists of a series of letters and/or numbers applied by manufacturers to identify the date and time of production.

Are Dates for Food Safety or Food Quality?

Manufacturers provide dating to help consumers and retailers decide when food is of best quality. Except for infant formula, dates are not an indicator of the product's safety and are not required by Federal law.

How Do Manufacturers Determine Quality Dates?

Factors including the length of time and the temperature at which a food is held during distribution and offered for sale, the characteristics of the food, and the type of packaging will affect how long a product will be of optimum quality. Manufacturers and retailers will consider these factors when determining the date for which the product will be of best quality.

For example, sausage formulated with certain ingredients used to preserve the quality of the product or fresh beef packaged in a modified atmosphere packaging system that helps ensure that the product will stay fresh for as long as possible. These products will typically maintain product quality for a longer period of time because of how the products are formulated or packaged.

The quality of perishable products may deteriorate after the date passes; however, such products should still be safe if handled properly. Consumers must evaluate the quality of the product prior to its consumption to determine if the product shows signs of spoilage.

What Types of Food Are Dated?

Open dating is found on most foods including meat, poultry, egg and dairy products. "Closed or coded dates" are a series of letters and/or numbers and typically appear on shelf-stable products such as cans and boxes of food.

What Date-Labeling Phrases are Used?

There are no uniform or universally accepted descriptions used on food labels for open dating in the United States. As a result, there are a wide variety of phrases used on labels to describe quality dates.

Examples of commonly used phrases:

- A "**Best if Used By/Before**" date indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- A "**Sell-By**" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale for inventory management. It is not a safety date.
- A "**Use-By**" date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date except for when used on infant formula as described below.
- A "**Freeze-By**" date indicates when a product should be frozen to maintain peak quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

Are Foods Safe to Eat After the Date Passes?

With an exception of infant formula (described below), if the date passes during home storage, a product should still be safe and wholesome if handled properly until the time spoilage is evident ([Chill: Refrigerate Promptly](#)). Spoiled foods will develop an off odor, flavor or texture due to naturally occurring spoilage bacteria. If a food has developed such spoilage characteristics, it should not be eaten.

Microorganisms such as molds, yeasts, and bacteria can multiply and cause food to spoil. Viruses are not capable of growing in food and do not cause spoilage. There are two types of bacteria that can be found on food: pathogenic bacteria, which cause foodborne illness, and spoilage bacteria, which do not cause illness but do cause foods to deteriorate and develop unpleasant characteristics such as an undesirable taste or odor making the food not wholesome. When spoilage bacteria have nutrients (food), moisture, time, and favorable temperatures, these

conditions will allow the bacteria to grow rapidly and affect the quality of the food. Food spoilage can occur much faster if food is not stored or handled properly. A change in the color of meat or poultry is not an indicator of spoilage ([The Color of Meat and Poultry](#)).

Now that you have a better understanding of date marking, this should help reduce food waste at your home. Listed below are more suggestions on ways to reduce food waste.

Ways to Avoid Wasting Food

- Be aware of how much food you throw away.
- Don't buy more food than can be used before it spoils.
- Plan meals and use shopping lists. Think about what you are buying and when it will be eaten. Check the fridge and pantry to avoid buying what you already have.
- Avoid impulse and bulk purchases, especially produce and dairy that have a limited shelf life.
- [Check the temperature setting of your fridge](#). Use a refrigerator thermometer to be sure the temperature is at 40 °F (4 °C) or below to keep foods safe. The temperature of your freezer should be 0 °F (-18 °C) or below.
- Avoid overpacking your fridge. Cold air must circulate around refrigerated foods to keep them properly chilled.
- [Wipe up spills immediately](#). It will reduce the growth of *Listeria* bacteria, which can grow at refrigerator temperatures. Also, cleaning up spills — especially drips from thawing meats — will help prevent cross-contamination, where bacteria from one food spread to another.
- Keep it covered! Store refrigerated foods in covered containers or sealed storage bags, and check leftovers daily for spoilage.
- [Refrigerate peeled or cut produce](#) for freshness and to keep them from going bad.
- Use your freezer! Freezing is a great way to store most foods to keep them from going bad until you are ready to eat them. The FDA's [FoodKeeper app](#) has information on how long most common foods can be stored in the freezer.
- Check your fridge often to keep track of what you have and what needs to be used. Eat or freeze items before you need to throw them away.
- When eating out, become a more mindful eater. If you're not terribly hungry, request smaller portions. Bring your leftovers home and refrigerate or freeze them within two hours and check the [FoodKeeper app](#) to see how long they'll be safe to eat.
- To keep foods safe when entertaining, [remember the two-hour rule](#). Don't leave perishable foods out at room temperature for more than two hours, unless you're keeping hot foods hot and cold foods cold. If you're eating outdoors and the temperature is above 90°F (32°C), perishable foods shouldn't be left out for more than one hour.

Locally, if you have questions or need more information, please reach out to Christa Campbell christaa@uga.edu or (706) 283-2037.

Adapted from the U.S. Food & Drug Administration's article "[Maintain Food Safety While Cutting Food Waste](#)" and the Food Safety & Inspection Service US Department of Agriculture's Food Product Dating <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/food-product-dating>