



MYCORENUTRITION

Nourish your core.

Expiration, Sell-By, Use-Before, and Use-By

Dates on Foods: What Do They Mean?

Often people open up their refrigerators, cupboards, and cabinets only to find foods with questionable integrity. Some people trust their noses. Others look for visible signs of mold or deterioration. Figuring out the difference between the “expiration,” “sell by,” “use before,” and “use by” dates may leave some people scratching their heads.

While it is always better that you are safe rather than sorry, the following guidelines and information should help to take the guesswork out of determining whether or not your food is good to eat.

Expiration date The expiration date is the last day the food is safe to eat. If you have not consumed it by this date, throw it away. After the expiration date, it may cause someone to become sick if consumed.

Sell by date This is the date that is printed for the supermarket. If the item has not sold by this date, the store should remove it from the shelf. It still may remain safe for consumption, if eaten after the marked date. Depending on the food, you still can store these items in your home for days to weeks after the sell by date.

Best if used before or by The best if used before or by date means the food has a guarantee of peak freshness by this date, if it is properly stored. After that date, it will still remain safe to consume for a while, although it will have a lesser quality of taste, flavor, or nutrition.

Managing foods For an exhaustive list of how to manage foods, visit the following Web sites:

Cold storage chart:

(http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/cic_text/food/cooking4groups/8.htm)

Foods purchased refrigerated:

(http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/cic_text/food/cooking4groups/9.htm)

Canned foods Making sure canned foods are safe is not as easy to determine as more highly perishable foods.

Follow this advice:

Many times the expiration date has to do with the actual can and not the food inside of it; many foods will outlast the can, but if the can starts to lose its integrity before the food, the expiration date will reflect this

If the can is dented at a double seam on the top or bottom of the can, throw it away immediately

If the can has rust on it, throw it away

If the can has a severe dent on the side that pulls the top or bottom of the can, throw it out

If the can is swollen, do not consume its contents

Dating requirements The only foods that are mandated by the US Dept of Agriculture to include dating requirements are infant formula and baby food. Many foods do not have any date or indication of freshness to determine whether they are safe to consume. Some foods use a different system called Julian dates, whereby the month is indicated by a number or a letter and the year is represented with only one number, representing the last number of the year it was produced (for example, 2009 is marked as a 9).

While following these guidelines can alleviate some of the confusion about whether a food is safe or not, the best advice probably is “when in doubt, throw it out!”