



## Dates on Food Products: What do they mean?

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According to the Environmental Protection Agency, about 40 percent of food in the United States is not eaten. In fact, Americans throw away about 35 million tons of food each year, making up the largest percentage of waste that travels to landfills and burns in incinerators. At a time when we are expected to feed 9 billion mouths globally by 2050, we need to learn how to reduce food waste.

It is important to not waste food that has been purchased. One way to do so is through food labeling which many consumers find confusing. “I found vegetable oil in my cupboard. It is 2 year old. Is it still okay to use?” “How long does summer sausage keep in the refrigerator?” Many times it is not so much a matter of safety as it is quality. We want food that is safe to eat as well as food that tastes good.

There is not a universally accepted food dating system in the United States. Most dating is voluntary and is the manufacturer’s best guess at how long the product will last. Except for infant formula product dating is not generally required by Federal regulations.

Let’s review some of the terms used by the industry. Clip this article and tape it to the inside of a cupboard door. Then you can remind yourself about these definitions when the situation arises.

**“Best before” or “better if used by/before”** are freshness dates. It tells how long the product will be at its best flavor and quality. It is not a purchase or safety date. The food is safe to eat after this date.

**“Expiration” or “use by”** are terms you will see on meat, yogurt, and eggs. It means you should use the product by that date for best flavor and quality. If properly stored, you have a one-week grace period to use the product.

Expiration dates on yeast or refrigerated dough indicates how long the product will retain its rising power.

**“Sell by”** found on poultry, fish, meat, bread and dairy products tell the supermarket how long to display the product for sale. Although a store should pull a product after the “sell by” date has passed, it remains legal to sell the food after this date. Most food is safe to eat for a week after her “sell by” date. Fresh meat, fish and poultry should be cooked within a day or 2 of home refrigeration or placed in the freezer for longer storage. Once frozen, it doesn’t matter if the date expires because foods kept frozen are safe indefinitely.

What is the **“shelf life of eggs?”** The **“sell by” or “expiration date”** on the carton is the last day the store may sell the eggs as fresh. On grade AA eggs, this date can’t be more than 30 days from the date the eggs were packed in the carton. They are still safe in your refrigerator for 3-5 weeks at 40 degrees or colder if placed the coldest part of the refrigerator, not on the door.

**Can codes** are packing codes to enable tracking of the product in interstate commerce. This enables manufacturers to rotate their stock as well as to locate their products in the event of a recall. They are not meant for the consumer to interpret as “use-by” dates.

Don’t overlook other factors, unrelated to dates that influence quality and safety of foods. Foods can develop an off odor, flavor or appearance due to spoilage bacteria. If a food has developed such

characteristics you should not use it. If foods are mishandled, food borne bacteria can grow and, if pathogens are present, cause foodborne illness—before or after the date on the package. For example, if hot dogs are taken to a picnic and left out several hours, they will not be safe if used thereafter, even if the date has not expired.

Other examples of potential mishandling are products that have been defrosted at room temperature more than two hours; cross contaminated; or it being handled by people who don't practice good sanitation. Make sure to follow the handling and preparation instructions on the label to ensure top quality and safety. Purchase a refrigerator thermometer to ensure that it is at 40 degree F or below.

Call the Wakulla County Extension Office with your food safety questions.

