



## Label Date Marks: Quality or Food Safety?

Food labels provide consumers with valuable information. Unfortunately, the meaning of label date marks are often misunderstood.

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Photo Credit: Bob McDonald, Penn State University

Date marking information may be written as “best buy,” “sell by” or “best if used by.” These dates are, surprisingly, a way for the manufacturer to give consumers an estimate of how long they believe the product will maintain good quality, not how long the food will be safe to eat (except for the case of infant formula). In fact, with the exception of infant formula, there are

no federal regulations requiring product dating. Factors, such as the contents and ingredients, can extend the life of a product. So, what does this mean? This means that food is often safe to consume beyond the marked date, assuming it has been handled, stored, packaged and prepared properly. Due to this misunderstanding, good food is often thrown away and wasted. With food waste a growing issue, it is important to learn more about date markings and how to keep food safe.

This brings up the question, how can food be handled to keep it safe for as long as possible? Moreover, how does one know if a food is still good to eat when the date has passed?

**Manufacturers develop these quality dates based on several factors.**

- The amount of time that a food is held during distribution and while awaiting sale.
- The temperature that a food is kept at during distribution and while awaiting sale.
- The type of the packaging of the product.
- In addition, the characteristics of a food can also affect the quality date. For example, if a product has added preservatives, then it will typically last longer.

### **What can consumers do to keep food safe past the quality date and ensure their food is safe to eat?**

- Maintain correct temperature of foods from the time you purchase it till it is served. For example, cook meat to the correct internal temperature. Keep food out of the temperature danger (40 degrees to 140 degrees F) as much as possible. Maintain refrigerator temperatures at 40 degrees F or lower and monitor the temperature with a refrigerator thermometer.
- Storage methods, such as freezing until ready for use, can be utilized for perishable items like meat and poultry that will not be prepared by the date mark.
- Foods such as cereals, pasta and flour should be closed off after opening and kept in a cool, dry place.
- In addition, it is important to keep in mind other general food safety precautions like regular hand washing, avoiding cross-contamination and cooking to the proper internal temperature.

**With all this considered, it is imperative to identify when food is not safe to eat. When food is spoiled, it will often develop a variety of different spoilage characteristics such as mold, atypical smell, an off flavor, or a different texture. For example, spoiled meat will sometimes darken or fade in color, become slimy, and develop a foul smell. These characteristics indicate spoilage and it is best to throw the food away. Just remember though, that microbial contamination will not change the smell, texture or appearance of a food but if consumed may make you very sick.**

### **Shelf stable foods, such as canned goods, offer a different set of considerations.**

- Discard immediately if they have any compromises to their containers such as dents, rust, or popped lids.
- If none of these issues is present, many canned goods can last for long periods of time.
- As noted above, the contents of the product can play a role in their shelf life. High acid canned goods such as tomato products will only last six months to one

year beyond the suggested dates. On the other hand, lower acid canned goods like peas and beans can last one to two years beyond the suggested date.

- Different types of packaging can also influence the life of products. While metal cans will last until the dates listed above, food canned properly in glass containers can last one to two years longer than the listed date.
- Foods sealed in plastic containers can last from six months to one year past the listed date.

The United State Department of Agriculture has a **“FoodKeeper”** app that can provide guidance when it comes to storage of food products and is available for free. [Date Marking of Food Packages](#) and [Refrigerator and Freezer Storage Guidelines](#) are Penn State Extension videos that provide additional information.

Handling and storing products correctly is an effective way to keep them safe beyond the quality date that is provided by the manufacturer.

## References:

FSIS. (2016, December 14). [Food Product Dating](#).

FSIS. (2011, October). [The Color of Meat and Poultry](#).

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