



Understanding Dates on Labels of Donated Food

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Food businesses want you to have important information about their products. That’s why they provide nutrition facts, company contact information, and “best by,” “sell by,” and “freeze by” dates. These dates are commonly called expiration dates. Some people think the dates tell them when food is no longer safe to eat, but these dates are not about food safety. Their meanings vary, depending on the wording.

Past-date foods can be — and often are — donated and distributed through food banks and pantries or used in meal kitchens. These organizations are dedicated to providing safe, quality foods (Feeding America, n.d.).

What Do the Dates Mean?

Table 1: Types of food dates and their meanings, with examples. (Photographs by H. Lester Schonberger, Virginia Tech.)

Label Phrase	Also Known As	Meaning	Example
Best by	Best if used by Best before Use by	Primarily, these phrases let consumers know when to consume the food so it meets the businesses’ quality standards. These labels are often found on nonperishable items, such as shelf-stable packaged foods.	
Sell by	Display until	Often found on dairy, such as milk or cheeses, and bakery foods, these labels, primarily let the store to know when it should sell the product, so their customers have products that meet the businesses’ quality standards.	
Freeze by	Prepare or freeze by Use or freeze by	Often found on meats and other more perishable foods, these labels primarily let consumers know when to freeze foods to maintain the producer’s quality standards until the food is consumed.	

Note: Foods can still be quality products and safely consumed after these dates. **Infant formula is an exception.** Never use formula after the “use by” date.

Why Are the Dates Important?

Food businesses provide “use by,” “sell by,” and “freeze by” dates to let consumers and retailers know when products will taste and look their best.

The federal government does not require product dating, except for infant formula. Infants and babies require specific nutrients as they grow, and manufacturers do not guarantee that formula will have the required nutritional value and quality if it is used after the date on the package. That’s why it is important not to use infant formula after the date (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

Food packaging dates assume that foods and drinks have been stored correctly to maintain quality and shelf life. For example, a bag of shredded cheddar cheese should be stored at or below 40°F to maintain quality and safety. When stored at room temperature for more than two hours, or one hour when the temperature is at or above 90°F, the quality will deteriorate and the food will be more likely to spoil quickly and could cause safety issues. (Boyer and McKinney, 2018).

When Shouldn’t I Eat Something?

Food quality and safety depend on factors such as the type of food, how it has been stored, processed, and how long the package has been open. Here are some important considerations:

- Foods that require temperature control, including perishable foods like meats and cheeses, have a much shorter shelf-life than shelf-stable foods such as crackers or unopened canned foods.
- Packages on some foods, such as milk, may say, “Freshest tasting within 7 days of opening.” This is meant to communicate quality and should not be confused with safety (United States Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).
- Pre-packaged foods from a store or restaurant (for example, deli sandwiches or salads) should be labeled with dates indicating when they were prepared. Be sure to store the food properly at 40°F or lower. For

highest quality, consume these prepared foods within four days, and discard them within seven days after preparation.

- Foods can be low in quality and still safe to eat. Bananas are a good example: Some people consider bananas with brown spots to be low quality, while others prefer them.

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