USDA Photo

# Food Product Dating

*"Sell by Feb 14" is a type of information you might find on a meat or poultry product. Are dates required on food products? Does it mean the product will be unsafe to use after that date? Here is some background information which answers these and other questions about product dating.*

## What is dating?

"Open Dating" (use of a calendar date as opposed to a code) on a food product is a date stamped on a product's package to help the store determine how long to display the product for sale. It can also help the purchaser to know the time limit to purchase or use the product at its best quality. It is not a safety date. After the date passes, while it may not be of best quality, refrigerated products should still be safe if handled properly and kept at 40 °F (4.4 °C) or below for the recommended storage times listed on the chart (see below). If product has a "use-by" date, follow that date. If product has a "sell-by" date or no date, cook or freeze the product by the times on the chart below.

## Is dating required by federal law?

Except for infant formula (see below), product dating is not generally required by Federal regulations. However, if a calendar date is used, it must express both the month and day of the month (and the year, in the case of shelf-stable and frozen products). If a calendar date is shown, immediately adjacent to the date must be a phrase explaining the meaning of that date such as "sell by" or "use before."

There is no uniform or universally accepted system used for food dating in the United States. Although dating of some foods is required by more than 20 states, there are areas of the country where much of the food supply has some type of open date and other areas where almost no food is dated.

## What types of food are dated?

Open dating is found primarily on perishable foods such as meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products. "Closed" or "coded" dating might appear on shelf-stable products such as cans and boxes of food.

## Types of Dates

- A **"Sell-By"** date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires.

- A **"Best if Used By (or Before)"** date is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

- A **"Use-By"** date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. The date has been determined by the manufacturer of the product.

- **"Closed or coded dates"** are packing numbers for use by the manufacturer.

## Safety After Date Expires

Except for "use-by" dates, product dates don't always pertain to home storage and use after purchase. "Use-by" dates usually refer to best quality and are not safety dates. Even if the date expires during home storage, a product should be safe, wholesome and of good quality if handled properly. See the accompanying refrigerator charts for storage times of dated products. If product has a "use-by" date, follow that date. If product has a "sell-by" date or no date, cook or freeze the product according to the times on the chart below.

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 for quality reasons.

If foods are mishandled, however, foodborne 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 hasn't expired.

# Agency Dry Product Guidelines
# June 2012

| Product | (According to Inspection) | by |
|---|---|---|
| **Adult and Baby Formulas & Supplements** | Popped Safety Seal, Cracks, Leaking, missing Ingredient label | 2 months prior to exp date |
| **Baby Food Jars or cans** | Popped Safety Seal, Cracks, Leaking, missing Ingredient label | 2 Months **prior to** code |
| **Beans/peas dried** | Open to product ,mold, Ingredient label (ie: one ingredient). Pinto Beans etc. | 1 year past |
| **Aseptic Containers (accept Juicy Juice)** | Visible Package Defect, Leaking, wicking liquid stain on cut end of package) Missing Ingredient label | 4-6 months past code ( 3 months past) |
| **Baby Cereal** | Open to product , Stains on Box, Missing Ingredient label | Before  Code date (Except Earths best brand) Oatmeal 30 days past code Rice 60 days past code |
| **Bottles & Jars (Exceptions listed in other categories)** | Poped Safety  Seal, Cracks, Leaking product Filth under rim of lid.  Missing ingredent label | 6 Months past code date |
| **Ocean Spray Juice (plastic) For Glass add 30days** | Popped Safety  Seal, Cracks, Leaking product Filth under rim of lid.  Missing  ingredients label | 30 days past code (plastic)  60 days glass except citrus, guava,refreshers, kiwi- strawberry These are 30 days past |
| **Ragu & Bertolli Pasta Sauces** | Poped Safety  Seal, Cracks, Leaking product ,Filth under rim of lid.  Missing ingredient  label | 2 Months past Code date |
| **Ocean Spray - Craisins** | Open to product damage, Mold, Missing Ingredient label | 120 Days past code |

| Category | Defects / Conditions | Shelf Life |
|---|---|---|
| Candy | Open to product damage, must be stored at 55-75 degrees, Missing Ingredient label | 12-18 Months |
| Canned Goods (low acid) (Except College brand Broths) | Bulging, Leaking, Severe Seam Dents, Missing ingredient Label, Severe Rust | 2-5 Years (5 Months) |
| Canned Goods (High acid) | Bulging, Leaking, Severe Seam Dents, Missing Label, Severe Rust | 12-18 Months |
| Cookies (except Keebler) | Open to product , Stains on Box, Missing Ingredient label | 2 months (4months past) |
| Cereal | Open to product , Missing Ingredient label | 6-12 Months past |
| Tea, bags<br>tea loose<br>tea instant<br>( Except Lipton tea mixes) | Open to product , Popped or missing Safety Seal, Filth Under Rim, Missing ingredient Label, | 18 months<br>2 years<br>3years<br>(6months) |
| Cocoa & Cocoa mixes | Open to product , Missing Ingredient label | indefinitely |
| Corn Flake Crumbs & Croutettes | Open to product , Stains on Box, Missing Ingredient label | 2 yrs past |
| Crackers & snack crackers ( Exceptions listed in other categories) | Open to product , Stains on Box, Missing Ingredient label | 8 Months past |
| Condiments (except dressings and Mayonnaise) | Visible Package Defect, Popped Safety Seal, Broken seal, Filth Under Rim, Bulging, Missing ingredient Label | 12 months |
| Dairy - Liquid shelf stable milk, cheese ,Velveeta, Cheese Wiz & Dry ( Except canned milk) | Visible Package Defect, Popped Safety Seal, Filth Under Rim, Bulging, Missing ingredient Label | 2 Months past (Evaporated and condensed milk 1yr past) |
| Dried Beans | Any Visible Package Defect, Mold | 1 year past |
| Flour and flour mixes (except stone ground or blue flour) | Any Visible Package Defect, Mold, Missing ingredient label | 6 -12 Months past (1 month) |
| Spices Whole (Spices Ground) | Any Visible Package Defect, Mold, Missing ingredient label | 2-4 years past |
| Adolph's & Lawry's Dry seasonings ( Liquid) | Open to product, Mold, Missing ingredient label | 6 months   (3 months) |

NORTHERN ILLINOIS FOOD BANK
Feeding Our Hungry Neighbors

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Dry soup mixes (except Lipton) | Open to product, Mold, Missing ingredient label | 1 year    (6 months) |
| Jellies , Jams & Preserves | Popped Safety Seal, Filth Under Rim of Lid, Missing ingredient  Label, No Inside Seal, leaking | 1 Year past |
| Popcorn dry kernels, | Any Visible Package Defect, Mold, (one ingredient item Popcorn) | 2 years past |
| Micowave popcorn | Any Visible Package Defect, Mold, Missing ingredient label | 1 year |
| Popcorn popped | Any Visible Package Defect, Mold, Missing ingredient label | 3 months past |
| Sauce mixes, non-dairy (spaghetti, taco, etc.) | Any Visible Package Defect, Mold, Missing ingredient label | 2 years past |
| Mayonnaise (Pure) | Visible Package Defect, Popped Safety Seal,Broken seal, Filth Under Rim, Bulging, Missing ingredient Label | 2-3 Months past Code Date |
| Oils (except Bertolli) | Popped Safety Seal, Filth Under Rim of Lid, Missing ingredient  Label, No Inside Seal, leaking | 6 Months past code date (Bertolli Olive Oil use by Code date) |
| Over-the-Counter Medicines & Vitamins | Broken Safety Seal, Common name of drug, list of ingredients, net quantity of contents potency per recommended dose, adequate directions for use,storage requirments if any,control number, expriation date, name and address of  responsible firm and warnings. | 1 month **Prior** to expiration date |
| Pasta & Rice Brown rice instant rice | Open to product ,damage, Mold, missing ingredient label | 2 year past 1 year 2 Months |
| Peanut Butter (except Skippy brand) | Popped or broken Safety Seal, Filth under rim, cracked jar or canister | 6 Months past (5months past) ( Skippy squeeze-it 2months past) |
| Potato chips | Any Visible Package Defect, Mold, Missing ingredient label | 2 Months past |
| Soda & mixers  in plastic & Diet in cans. (Regular Soda cans) | Popped Safety Seal, Broken Seal, Leaking or no pressure on can / bottle | 3 Months past (9 months) |
| Vinegar | Popped Safety Seal, Missing Label, Leaking | 2 years past |
| Water | Popped Safety Seal, Missing Label, Leaking | 1-2 years past |
| Yeast & pectin | Popped Safety Seal, Missing Label, Leaking | Code date |
| Salad Dressing (Except Wish-Bone) | Broken Seal, Leaking, Foreign Matter Visible, Missing labels. | 2 Months past (3 Months past code) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **All Nestles product** | Any item open to product or product that does not have a machine seal, Missing Ingredient label. | Code Date |

**These recommended guidelines are a compilation of America's Second Harvest's Donor Requirements/Restrictions , MSNBC Food Safety Guidelines for Dry Goods, the Food Marketing Institute & Cornell University Institute of Food Science.**

# Guidelines for Evaluating Donated Product

**Always DISCARD product that show signs of contamination such as
gnawed containers, rodent droppings, unknown spills on products or rotten smells**

**Contaminants such as these can make people sick:**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Toxins | Mold | Pet foods |
| Cleaning Products | Broken glass | Bugs, rodent droppings & urine |

## Cans

***Discard cans with***:
- Severe dents on side seam, near rim, or that prevents stacking
- Side seam incomplete, blown out, or defective
- Bulging or puffed ends
- Pits or pinholes
- Leaks
- Missing or illegible labels
- Pitted rust

## Glass Food Containers

***Discard jars with***:
- Loose cap or bulged safety seal
- Foreign objects or unusual product separation
- Missing or illegible labels
- Mold (often white or dark and can be long, stringy, clumpy, or ropy)
- Dirt, webs, insect skins, evidence of submersion, or leaks on screw tops
- Cracks or chips
- Home canned goods

## Pouches

***Discard pouches with***:
- Leaking seals, holes, or punctures
- Cuts, cracks, or scratches that could leak
- Malformed or incomplete seals or those with foreign objects trapped inside
- Folded over wrinkles caused by one side being longer than the other
- Missing or illegible labels
- Severely wrinkled seals

## Bags and Sacks

***Discard bags and sacks with***:
- Rips, tears, punctures, or holes
- Insect damage:

***Look carefully for:***
- Bugs in seams
- Bore holes
- Movement or spots in products
- Insect skins or chaff in bottom of containers
- Rodent droppings or urine stains (use black light)
- Rodent gnaw marks
- Spills or stains from any unknown source or any contaminant
- Missing or illegible labels

## Boxes

***Boxes with inner bag***:
- Look for contaminants on box

***Look at inner bag – discard if it is***
- Torn, leaking, or contaminated
- Has imperfect or leaking seals
- Has moldy or foreign objects inside

***To save good inner bags of food from damaged box***:  Place inner bag into a plastic bag and insert label

***Boxes without inner bag***:
- Do not use if opened
- Look for contaminants or box
- Look for insects, insect skins, webs, or chaff
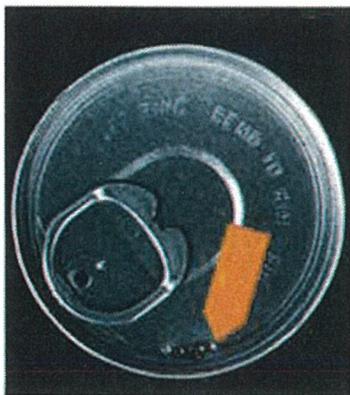
# Can Evaluation- **Bad** Cans

**Bulging Ends**

**Rust that cannot be wiped off**
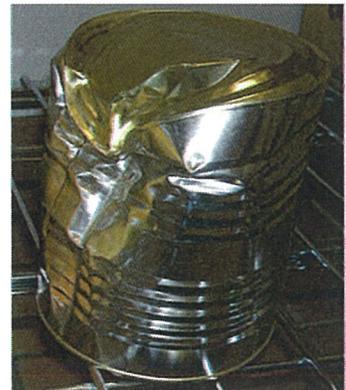
**Sharp hits on rim**

**Leaking Cans**

**Cans that do not lie flat**

**Excessive dents**

When in doubt throw it out or put it aside to be reviewed by staff

# Can Evaluation- **Good** Cans

**Cans that have slight dents**



**Slight dents to the outside of rim lid that do not affect the inner portion of the lid**



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The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is the public health agency in the U.S. Department of Agriculture responsible for ensuring that the nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry, and egg products is safe, wholesome, and correctly labeled and packaged.

**USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline**
**1-888-MPHotline**
(1-888-674-6854)

Other examples of potential mishandling are products that have been: defrosted at room temperature more than two hours; cross contaminated; or 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.

## Dating Infant Formula

Federal regulations require a "use-by" date on the product label of infant formula under FDA inspection. If consumed by that date, the formula must contain not less than the quantity of each nutrient as described on the label. Formula must maintain an acceptable quality to pass through an ordinary bottle nipple. If stored too long, formula can separate and clog the nipple.

The "use-by" date is selected by the manufacturer, packer or distributor of the product on the basis of product analysis throughout its shelf life, tests, or other information. It is also based on the conditions of handling, storage, preparation, and use printed on the label. Do not buy or use baby formula after its "use-by" date.

## What do can codes mean?

Cans must exhibit a packing code 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.

These codes, which appear as a series of letters and/or numbers, might refer to the date or time of manufacture. They aren't meant for the consumer to interpret as "use-by" dates. There is no book or Web site that tells how to translate the codes into dates.

Cans may also display "open" or calendar dates. Usually these are "best if used by" dates for peak quality.

Canned foods are safe indefinitely as long as they are not exposed to freezing temperatures, or temperatures above 90 °F (32.2° C). If the cans look ok, they are safe to use. Discard cans that are dented, rusted, or swollen. High-acid canned foods (tomatoes, fruits) will keep their best quality for 12 to 18 months; low-acid canned foods (meats, vegetables) for 2 to 5 years.

## Dates on Egg Cartons

Use of either a "Sell-by" or "Expiration" (EXP) date is not federally required, but may be State required, as defined by the egg laws in the State where the eggs are marketed. Some State egg laws do not allow the use of a "sell-by" date.

Many eggs reach stores only a few days after the hen lays them. Egg cartons with the USDA grade shield on them must display the "pack date" (the day that the eggs were washed, graded, and placed in the carton). The number is a three-digit code that represents the consecutive day of the year starting with January 1 as 001 and ending with December 31 as 365. When a "sell-by" date appears on a carton bearing the USDA grade shield, the code date may not exceed 45 days from the date of pack.

Always purchase eggs before the "Sell-By" or "EXP" date on the carton. After the eggs reach home, refrigerate the eggs in their original carton and place them in the coldest part of the refrigerator, not in the door. For best quality, use eggs within 3 to 5 weeks of the date you purchase them. The "sell-by" date will usually expire during that length of time, but the eggs are perfectly safe to use.

## UPC or Bar Codes

Universal Product Codes appear on packages as black lines of varying widths above a series of numbers. They are not required by regulation but manufacturers print them on most product labels because scanners at supermarkets can "read" them quickly to record the price at checkout.

Bar codes are used by stores and manufacturers for inventory purposes and marketing information. When read by a computer, they can reveal such specific information as the manufacturer's name, product name, size of product and price. The numbers are not used to identify recalled products.

## Storage Times

Since product dates aren't a guide for safe use of a product, how long can the consumer store the food and still use it at top quality? Follow these tips:
- Purchase the product before the date expires.
- If perishable, take the food home immediately after purchase and refrigerate it promptly. Freeze it if you can't use it within times recommended on chart.
- Once a perishable product is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires because foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely.
- Follow handling recommendations on product.
- Consult the following storage charts.

## Refrigerator Home Storage (at 40 °F [4.4 °C] or below) of Fresh or Uncooked Products

If product has a "use-by" date, follow that date. If product has a "sell-by" date or no date, cook or freeze the product by the times on the following chart.

| Product | Storage Times After Purchase |
|---|---|
| Poultry | 1 or 2 days |
| Beef, Veal, Pork and Lamb | 3 to 5 days |
| Ground Meat and Ground Poultry | 1 or 2 days |
| Fresh Variety Meats (Liver, Tongue, Brain, Kidneys, Heart, Chitterlings) | 1 or 2 days |
| Cured Ham, Cook-Before-Eating | 5 to 7 days |
| Sausage from Pork, Beef or Turkey, Uncooked | 1 or 2 days |
| Eggs | 3 to 5 weeks |

## Refrigerator Home Storage (at 40 °F [4.4 °C] or below) of Processed Products Sealed at Plant

If product has a "use-by" date, follow that date. If product has a "sell-by" date or no date, cook or freeze the product by the times on the following chart.

| Processed Product | Unopened, After Purchase | After Opening |
|---|---|---|
| Cooked Poultry | 3 to 4 days | 3 to 4 days |
| Cooked Sausage | 3 to 4 days | 3 to 4 days |
| Sausage, Hard/Dry, shelf-stable | 6 weeks/pantry | 3 weeks |
| Corned Beef, uncooked, in pouch with pickling juices | 5 to 7 days | 3 to 4 days |
| Vacuum-packed Dinners, Commercial Brand with USDA seal | 2 weeks | 3 to 4 days |
| Bacon | 2 weeks | 7 days |
| Hot dogs | 2 weeks | 1 week |
| Luncheon meat | 2 weeks | 3 to 5 days |
| Ham, fully cooked | 7 days | Slices, 3 days; Whole, 7 days |
| Ham, canned, labeled "keep refrigerated" | 9 months | 3 to 4 days |
| Ham, canned, shelf stable | 2 years/pantry | 3 to 5 days |
| Canned Meat and Poultry, shelf stable | 2 to 5 years/pantry | 3 to 4 days |

# Food Safety Questions?

## Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at **1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854).**

The hotline is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish). Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at

**www.fsis.usda.gov**

Send E-mail questions to **MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov**.

## AskKaren.gov

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7 and a live chat during Hotline hours.

Mobile phone users can access **m.askkaren.gov**

**PregunteleaKaren.gov**