

# What Do the Dates on Food Products Mean?

OCTOBER 2024 NEWSLETTER



## ARE DATES FOR FOOD SAFETY OR FOOD QUALITY?

Most food product dating is not an indicator of a food product's safety and is not required by state or federal law. Food manufacturers often provide dating to help consumers and retailers decide when food is of the best quality. However, a food product may not be used beyond a manufacturer's use-by date if the manufacturer determines the use-by date based on food safety.

When dates are voluntarily applied by a food manufacturer, the foods must be labeled in a manner that is truthful and not misleading. To comply, a calendar date must express both the month and day of the month. In the case of shelf-stable and frozen products, the year should also be displayed. Additionally, immediately adjacent to the date should be a phrase explaining the meaning of that date such as "Best if Used By."

## TYPES OF FOOD PRODUCT DATING

Two types of product dating may be shown on a food product label.

BEST If Used By  
JUL0324 KTA262 1254 4

**"Open Dating"** is a calendar date applied to a food product by the manufacturer or retailer. The date provides consumers with information on the estimated time for which the product will be of the best quality and helps the retailer determine how long to display the product for sale. Open dating is found on most foods including meat, poultry, egg, and dairy products.

**"Closed Dating"** is a code that consists of a series of letters and/or numbers applied by manufacturers to identify the date and time of production. Closed or "coded" dates typically appear on shelf-stable products such as canned and boxed foods.

## WHAT DO CAN CODES MEAN?

Can codes are a type of closed dating that enable tracking of products in interstate commerce. These codes also enable manufacturers to rotate their stock and locate their products in the event of a recall. Can codes appear as a series of letters and/or numbers and refer to the date the product was canned. The codes are not meant for consumers to interpret as a "Best if Used By" date. Cans must exhibit a code or the date of canning.

Cans may also display open or calendar dates. These dates are generally meant to be read as "Best if Used By" dates for peak quality.



## WHAT DATE-LABELING PHRASES ARE USED?

There are no uniform or universally accepted descriptions used on food labels for open dating in the United States. As a result, there are a wide variety of phrases used on labels to describe quality dates.

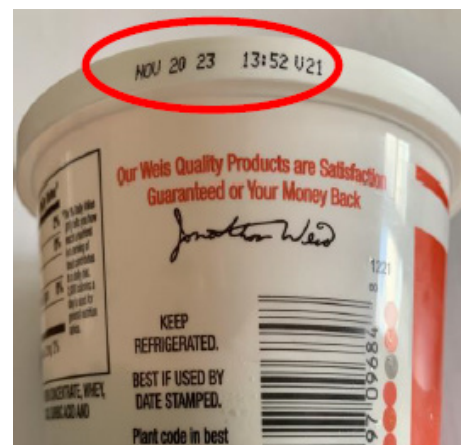
### Examples of commonly used phrases:

- A **"Use-By"** date is the last date recommended for the use of the product. The use-by date may or may not have been based on food safety considerations. A food establishment should assume that a use-by date is based on food safety considerations and not use the product beyond that date unless they have documentation from the manufacturer that the date is not based on food safety. Use-by dates are required on infant formula as the nutritional quality of the formula may wane over time.
- A **"Best if Used By/Before"** date indicates when a product will be of the best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or food safety date.
- A **"Sell-By"** date tells the retailer how long to display the product for sale for inventory management. It is not a safety date, but, for a product like milk, may be an indication that the product's expected shelf life is approximately seven days after the sell-by date under ideal storage conditions.
- A **"Freeze-By"** date indicates when a product should be frozen to maintain peak quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

## HOW DO MANUFACTURERS DETERMINE QUALITY DATES?

Factors including the length of time and the temperature at which a food is held during warehousing and distribution, the characteristics of the food, and the type of packaging affect how long a product will be of optimum quality. Manufacturers and retailers will consider these factors when determining the date for which the product will be of the best quality.

Some products use preservatives to maintain the quality of the product for longer periods of time. Others, such as fresh beef, are packaged in modified atmosphere packaging that helps ensure that the product will stay fresh for as long as possible. These products will typically maintain product quality for a longer period of time because of how the products are formulated or packaged.



## PROPER FOOD HANDLING AND STORAGE

The quality of perishable products may deteriorate over time. Microorganisms such as mold, yeast and bacteria can multiply and cause food to spoil.

Two types of bacteria can be found in food: pathogenic bacteria, which cause foodborne illness, and spoilage bacteria, which do not cause illness but do cause foods to deteriorate and develop unpleasant characteristics such as an undesirable taste or odor.

When spoilage bacteria have nutrients (food), moisture, time, and favorable temperatures, these conditions will allow the bacteria to grow rapidly and affect the quality of the food. Food spoilage can occur much faster if food is not stored or handled properly. Food establishment employees must evaluate the quality of food products to determine if they show signs of spoilage. Spoiled foods will develop an off odor, flavor or texture due to naturally occurring spoilage bacteria. If there are any indications of spoilage, the product should be discarded.

Store canned foods and other shelf-stable products in a cool, dry place. Never put them above or beside a stove, in a damp area (like under a sink), or in any place exposed to high or low temperature extremes. Temperatures below 75°F are best. Be sure to rotate your stock of canned goods using the FIFO (First In, First Out) method. Discard bulging, rusted, leaking, or deeply dented cans.

Foods requiring refrigeration such as milk must be stored to maintain a temperature of 41°F or below.



## WHAT DO THE DATES ON EGG CARTONS MEAN?

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 pack date 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 30 days from the pack date. It is recommended that eggs be refrigerated in their original carton and placed in the coldest part of the refrigerator.



## WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR DATING INFANT FORMULA?

Federal regulations require a "Use-By" date on the product label of infant formula under inspection by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Consumption by this date ensures the formula contains no less than the quantity of each nutrient as described on the label. The formula must maintain an acceptable quality to pass through an ordinary bottle nipple.

The "Use-By" date is selected by the manufacturer, packer or distributor of the product based on product analysis of its shelf life, testing and/or other information. It is also based on the conditions of handling, storage, preparation and use printed on the label. **Retailers must not sell baby formula after its "Use-By" date.**

## DATE MARKING

### Q: Why do we date mark foods in our food establishment?

A: Some bacteria that can cause foodborne illness can grow at temperatures below 41°F if given enough time. Specifically, *Clostridium botulinum* (botulism) and *Listeria monocytogenes*.

### Q: What foods need to be date-marked?

A: Time/temperature controlled for safety (TCS) foods held under refrigeration for more than 24 hours from the time they were prepared (if prepared on-premises) or from the time the original container is opened (if prepared and packaged at a food processing plant).

### Q: How long can date-marked foods be held under refrigeration?

A: Date-marked foods can be held for a maximum of seven (7) days. They must be served, sold or discarded by the end of Day 7.

### Q: How are the days counted?

A: The day the food is prepared on-premises or when the original container is opened is counted as Day 1.

### Q: What if the food is frozen?

A: The "Seven Day Clock" stops when a food is frozen and restarts when it is thawed. For example, if a food is frozen on Day 3, the day it is subsequently thawed counts as Day 4.

### Q: Are there any TCS foods that should be held under refrigeration for less than seven (7) days?

A: Yes, if the manufacturer's use-by date has been determined based on food safety and is less than seven days, that use-by day should not be exceeded.

### Q: What if date-marked foods are used as ingredients in a prepared food?

A: The prepared food is then date-marked with the date marking of the earliest prepared ingredient or the earliest date that an original container of a TCS food ingredient was opened. For example, a can of tuna is opened and date marked. On Day 3 the tuna is used to make tuna salad. The tuna salad would be date-marked to be served or discarded within four (4) four days after preparation.

### Q: Are there any foods that are not required to be date-marked?

A: Yes. Cultured dairy products such as sour cream, buttermilk, and yogurt. Dry fermented sausages such as pepperoni or Genoa salami. Salt-cured products such as prosciutto or Parma ham. Preserved fish products. In-shell molluscan shellfish (oysters, clams, mussels, etc.). Hard cheeses. Deli salads such as potato salad, chicken salad, or pasta salad if produced in a food processing plant. If you have a question about date-marking a TCS food product, call the Health Department.

*Acknowledgment: Much of the above information was provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS).*

