



Food Product Dating and Storage Times



Introduction

“Open Dating” on a food product is a date stamped on a product’s packages to help the store determine how long to hold the food for sale. It can be helpful to the consumer to identify the time limit to buy the item or when the product is at its best quality. It is NOT a safety date.

With the exception of infant formula and baby food, product dating is not required by federal regulations. If a date is used on perishable foods, it must have both the day and month. On shelf-stable and frozen products the year must also be included, a phrase explaining the meaning of the date such as “sell by” or “use before” must also be present.

There is no uniform system used for food dating by manufacturers in the U.S. Although dating of some foods is required by more than 20 states, some states do not require any date codes.

When present “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 hold the food for sale. You should buy the food before the sell-by-date expires.
- A “Best-if-Used-By (or Before) -Date” indicates best flavor or quality. It is not a safety date and does not indicate when a food should be purchased.
- A “Use-By-Date” is the last date recommended for peak quality. The date is determined by the manufacturer of the product.
- “Closed or coded dates” are packing numbers for use by the manufacturer so if there is a problem with the food, it can be recalled.

Safety after dates expire

Except for “use-by-dates,” product dates don’t always refer to home storage or use after purchase. Even if the date expires during home storage, perishable foods should be safe, wholesome, and of good quality — if handled properly and kept in the refrigerator or frozen.

Changing dates

A retailer can legally sell fresh or processed meat and poultry products beyond the expiration date on the package as long as the product is wholesome. It is also legal for a retailer to change a date on wholesome fresh meat that has been cut and wrapped in the meat department of the store. However, retailers cannot change dates on products packaged under federal inspection. If a food is not handled properly, it can become a health hazard regardless of the date code.

Dating of infant formula and baby food

Formula and baby food dating is for quality as well as nutrient retention. The “use-by-date” is selected by the manufacturer on the basis of product analysis throughout its shelf life. It is also based on the conditions of handling, storage, preparation, and use printed on the label. Do not buy or use baby formula or baby food after its “use-by-date.”

Can Codes

Cans must show a packing code so the food can be tracked through distribution. This helps manufacturers rotate their stock as well as to locate their products in the event of a recall. These codes aren’t meant for the consumer to interpret as “use-by” dates. Cans may also display “open” or calendar dates. Usually these are “best if used by” dates for optimum quality. In general, high-acid foods such as canned tomatoes can be stored on the shelf for 12 to 18 months; low-acid

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foods such as canned meat, poultry, fish and most vegetables will keep 2 to 5 years -- if the can remains in good condition and if it has been stored in a cool, clean, dry place. Normally food from these cans is safe to eat unless the can is bulging or leaking, but the quality may be diminished.

Dates on Egg Cartons

If an egg carton has an expiration date on it such as "EXP July 1", be sure that the date has not passed when you buy the eggs. That is the last day the store may sell the eggs as "fresh." On eggs which use a federal grading like, Grade AA, the date cannot be more than 30 days from the date the eggs were put in the carton. If you purchase a carton of eggs before the expiration date, you should be able to use the eggs safely for 3 to 5 weeks from the date of purchase.

Storage Times

Since dates aren't a good guide for safe use of a product, follow these tips to be sure that food is still top quality.

- Purchase the food before the expiration date.
- For perishable food, take it home immediately after purchase and refrigerate or freeze it promptly. Refrigerators should be kept at 40 ° F or below, while freezers should be set a 0° F or below.
- Once a perishable food is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires because foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely.
- Follow handling recommendations on the product.
- Consult the following storage chart for fresh or uncooked meat and poultry.

Refrigerated Home Storage (at 40° F or below) of **Fresh or Uncooked Products**. If product has a "Use-By-Date", follow that date. If the product has a "Sell-By-Date" or no date, cook or freeze by the times on the following chart. These storage times are general recommendations at refrigeration temperatures.

PRODUCT	STORAGE TIMES AFTER PURCHASE
Poultry	1 to 2 days
Beef, veal, pork, lamb	3 to 5 days
Ground beef and ground poultry	1 to 2 days
Variety meats (liver, tongue, brain, kidneys, heart, chitterlings)	1 to 2 days
Cured ham, cook-before-eating	5 to 7 days

Sausage from pork, beef or turkey, uncooked	1 to 2 days
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Eggs	3 to 5 weeks
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Refrigerator Home Storage (at 40° F or below) for **Processed Products Sealed at the Plant**. If product has a "Use-By-Date" follow this 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*	7 days
Lunch Meats	2 weeks*	3 to 5 days
Ham, fully cooked	7 days	3 days - slices, 7 days - whole
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

*no longer than 1 week after a "sell-by-date".

References

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