

# UNDERSTANDING FOOD PACKAGE DATES

## Do You Keep it or Throw it Out?

**In the United States, people throw away 30-40% of the food they buy. Are we throwing food away unnecessarily? Perhaps. If you are using the dates stamped on food products as your guide, then you might need to revisit your strategy. So, what do those numbers mean?**

### Sell By or Pull Date

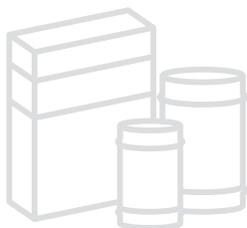


This date indicates **when stores** must remove products. Food will be safe to eat after this date if it has been refrigerated. Dairy products will usually be edible at least one week longer than the sell by date. Eggs will keep 3-5 weeks beyond the date listed. Foods that use sell-by or pull dates include milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, cream, eggs, lunchmeats, packaged salad mixes.

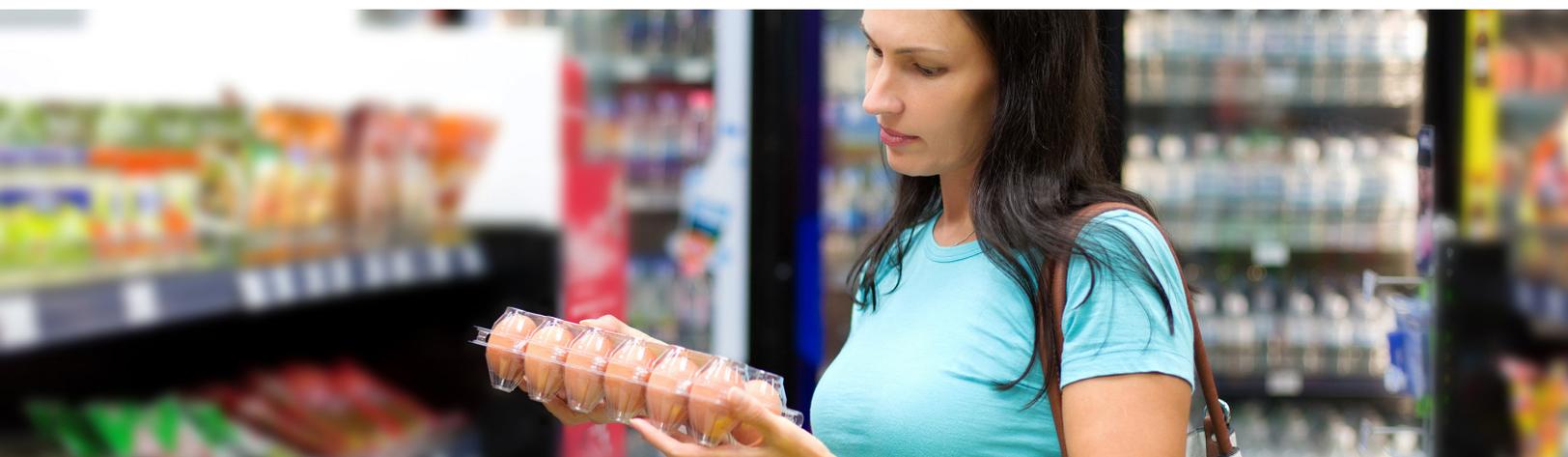
### Best If Used By Date

This date is a recommendation to consumers when the product's flavor or quality is highest. It is not a purchase or safety date.

### Pack Dates



This date, usually used on canned foods, crackers, cookies, and spices, is the date the product was packaged. It is used by manufacturers and retailers to track inventory, rotate items, and locate items in case of recall. Since manufacturers use their own system of dating, it may be hard for consumers to interpret the date. Packages of foods will be safe for long periods of time after the pack date but may not be as flavorful. Canned foods will be safe, but may have changes in the taste and texture, for many years after this date. If the container has bulges or dents, throw it away. Any product with a broken seal or "off" smell should not be eaten.





## Use By Date

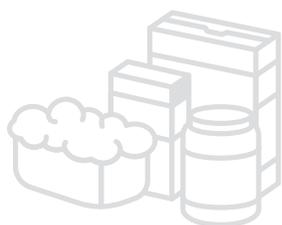
This is the last date recommended to ensure a product's peak quality. The date has been determined by the manufacturer of the product.

## Expiration Date



Expiration dates are printed on infant formula, baby food, vitamins, over-the-counter drugs, yeast, baking powder, cake mixes, and pectin. They may read "Expires 2/24/11" or "Do not use after 2/24/11". Infant formula, baby food, and over-the-counter drugs should never be consumed after the expiration date because they may not function in the body as originally intended. Leavening agents like yeast will be safe after this date, but may not be as effective. The same is true for baking mixes and pectin used for jams and jellies.

## Quality Assurance Date



The better if used by date is used for foods that have a long shelf life, but will begin to lose flavor or develop off-flavors. The date listed is an estimate of how long the food will be of optimal quality. Quality is defined as smell, taste, and texture; it's not a measure of safety.

If the product smells or tastes bad or if the seal on the package has been broken, don't use it. Packaged food mixes, such as macaroni and cheese, boxed soups, bakery products, cheese, some canned foods, cold cereals, peanut butter, and mayonnaise often use this type of date stamp.

If you have any questions, contact your local Extension office.

Reference: USDA



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