

# Kitchen and Food Safety

## Understanding Food Package Dates



Are we throwing food away unnecessarily? Perhaps. If you use the dates stamped on food products as your guide, 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 be kept for 3-5 weeks beyond the date listed. Foods that use sell-by or pull dates include milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, cream, eggs, lunchmeats, and 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. Manufacturers and retailers use it to track inventory, rotate items, and locate items in case of recall. Since manufacturers use their dating system, it may be hard for consumers to interpret the date. Packages of foods will be safe for long periods after the pack date but may not be as flavorful. Canned foods will be safe but may have changes in 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 manufacturer of the product has determined the date.

## 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 initially intended. Leavening agents like yeast will be safe but may not be as effective after this date. The same applies to baking mixes and pectin used for jams and jellies.

## Call Your Local Office

Contact your local Illinois Extension office with your food safety questions: [go.illinois.edu/FindILExtension](https://go.illinois.edu/FindILExtension).

## References

- [Food Product Dating](#), USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service.

## Quality Assurance Date

It is best if foods with a long shelf life are used before expiration, but they may begin to lose flavor or develop off-flavors. The date indicated estimates how long the food will be of optimum quality. Quality is defined as odor, taste, and texture; it is not a measure of safety.

If the product smells or tastes bad or 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 date stamp.

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