

# Food Fact Sheet

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## DECODING FOOD PRODUCT DATES



How many of us have cleaned a cupboard, refrigerator or freezer and tried to remember when we bought a food buried in the back? On closer inspection of the food's product dating information, perhaps further questions arose:

- What exactly is a "use-by" date?
- How does one crack a date code?
- Where can we go for more help to know if the food is or isn't safe to use?

### Tips for Decoding Food Dating

Here are some tips to help decide whether to eat the food. In some cases, the food still may be safe; but the quality no longer may be what we want.

**Tip 1: Determining Type of Food Product Dating** – Look for one of these two types of dating information on the food:

- **Open Dating** gives an actual date instead of a code. It is used mainly on perishable foods such as meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products. It helps the store know when to pull these food from shelves. It also can help consumers purchase a food at its best quality.
- **Closed or Coded Dating** may appear on more shelf-stable foods, such as cans and boxes.

Except for infant formula and some baby food, food product labeling is not required by federal government regulations. Additional dating of foods is required by some states. *(See section on formula and baby food toward the end of this fact sheet.)*

**Tip 2: Deciphering Dates** – Use these guidelines from the United States Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA/FSIS) for interpreting the two different types of food product dating.

**Open Dating** – There are three types of open dating where an actual calendar date is displayed.



1. **Use-by Date:** the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. The date has been determined by the manufacturer.

**What to do:** The best policy is to use the product by this date.

2. **Sell-by Date:** tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires.

**What to do:** How long the food is safe to eat and/or maintains a high quality after this date depends on the food. Tip 4 provides further information about how to use the Internet to access the company if contact information isn't given on the food product. **Note:** Once a food is opened, it frequently needs to be used more quickly than it would if it remained unopened.

3. **Best if Used By (or Before) Date:** recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

**What to do:** If possible, contact the company for more information – see Tip 4 if contact information isn't given on the food product. The food still may be safe. Yet, who wants to eat (or have their cooking ability judge by!) A baked product made from a mix where the leavening ingredients were too old to make the food rise. Or, where the fat in a food – such as nuts – turned rancid over time. One cake company hotline said its cake mix still should taste good for three months past the label date; however it would be best to discard the accompanying nuts which no longer may be at peak flavor.

**Closed or Coded Dating** – **Closed or coded dates** are packing numbers for use by the manufacturer. Tip 3 gives some clues that may help crack the code on canned foods. However, there is no standardized coding system used for foods. It may be necessary to call, write or visit the Web site of the company to help determine whether

these foods are safe and/or at best quality to eat.

**Tip 3: Cracking the Code on Canned Foods** – There is no uniform coding system used on canned foods. Some may be as specific as day, month and year of production while others only may give the year. Others might include specific plant manufacturing or product information. The most likely spot for this information is the top or bottom of the can.

The Canned Food Alliance gives these tips to help interpret some coding:

*“For month coding, if a number is used, numbers 1 through 9 represent January through September, and letters O for October, N for November and D for December. If letters are used, A= January and L= December, unless otherwise noted. For year coding 6=2006, etc.”*

Information isn’t given in the same order by all companies – for example, some may give the year first, some the month. Others may list information that has nothing to do with dating first.

Sometimes, rather than a specific day of a month, the “Julian date” or day of the year is given – for example, January 1 would be “1” and February 1 would be “32”.

These two illustrations by the Canned Food Alliance show how this might work:

- **Can code: 2061** (February 6, 2001); 2=month, 06=date, 1=year
- **Can code: 0195** (July 14, 2000); 0=year, 195=Julian date – July 14<sup>th</sup> is the 195<sup>th</sup> day of the year

**What to do:** As a general guideline, the Canned Food Alliance recommends eating canned food within two years of PROCESSING for best quality. Many cans will include a “for best quality use by” date stamped somewhere on the can. In a well run and busy store there should be a fairly constant turnover of canned goods, with cans on the shelf only a short time before you purchase them.



**Special Considerations for Baby Food Labeling** – While we might decide to experiment with eating an older food ourselves, we should avoid this practice when feeding babies. It is a federal regulation to require a “use-by” date on infant formula and the types of baby food under inspection by the Food and Drug Administration. Baby food is dated for both quality and nutrition retention.

- If consumed by that date, the formula or food 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; test; 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 or baby food after its use-by date.

**When Good Food Goes Bad** – If a food is mishandled, it can become unsafe before a date listed on the package. Mishandling examples include:

- Leaving perishable foods at room longer than two hours.
- Introducing harmful bacteria through cross-contamination. For example, a cooked hamburger is served from a plate that held a raw hamburger.
- Failing to wash hands before handling food, coughing or sneezing on food, etc.

**Avoiding Problems** – Here's a five-step plan for avoiding problems with outdated foods in the future.

1. READ LABELS CAREFULLY when purchasing food for usage dates.
2. Keep a permanent marker pen in your kitchen and put the date, month and YEAR you purchased the food on the container.
3. Practice “first in, first out” or what food service professionals refer to as FIFO, for foods. If you have purchased several containers of the same type of food, arrange the containers so you reach for the oldest package first.
4. If you tossed portions of expired foods, buy a smaller container or fewer packages next time.
5. If you can't use a perishable food by the expiration date, freeze it. A food kept frozen at 0°F will be safe indefinitely although it will decrease in quality with time.

**Pros and Cons of Buying Food in Bulk and Stocking Up on Sales** – Frequently, it IS cheaper to buy the larger box or bottle. Getting two packages for the price of one IS a bargain! But, the phrase, “penny wise, pound foolish” may apply if:

- The extra package must be tossed because it wasn't used within a safe-to-eat time period.

- The remainder of the large box was discarded because the food tasted too stale to eat.
- Additional (and perhaps, costly) ingredients were added to a recipe using a food product that deteriorated in quality. The resulting product had such a poor taste that the cost of the original “bargain” item, as well as the price of the added ingredients, was lost. The problem here is compounded by, as another phrase states, “tossing good money after bad.”
- What was to be an inexpensive, delicious, made-from-scratch item had to be replaced by a costlier, ready-to-go food to get company dinner on the table in time.

– *Source: Food Reflections Newsletter, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County*