

Understanding Product Dates

Because different product dates have different meanings, it is important to know which product date is used and to understand what it means. It is also important to understand that, except for expiration dates, product dates do not necessarily indicate when foods are no longer safe to consume. The following paragraphs describe the meaning of some product dates that may be found on food.

Expiration and Use-by Dates

Generally, “expiration” dates and “use-by” dates are the last dates that the manufacturer *recommends* a food item be consumed to ensure peak quality and nutrient retention. However, there is no regulation requiring that manufacturers mark their product with such dates.

The one exception to these general rules is infant formula. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires manufacturers mark infant formula with a “use-by” date. Additionally, the FDA prohibits the sale of infant formula after the use-by date.

Best-if-used-by Dates

A “best-if-used-by” date is the last date a food item will be at its peak, in terms of flavor and quality. At some point after that date, the product will begin to undergo changes in taste, color, texture, and/or nutrient content. However, the product may be wholesome and safe to consume, and retain most of its nutrient value, long after the “best-if-used-by” date.

Sell-by Dates and Pack Dates

A “sell-by” date is the date by which the manufacturer recommends that a store sell the food product, and is not necessarily a reliable indicator of how long it may retain its wholesomeness or nutritional value.

A “pack date” indicates when the product was packaged or processed. While it may help to determine the age of the product, it does not necessarily provide useful information on its wholesomeness or nutritional value.

Food Safety

Foods that show signs of spoilage, infestation, or other visible defects should not be used or distributed, regardless of product dates or when the foods were received, as such food is generally considered not fit for human consumption. When in doubt, throw it out.