

Understanding Food Date Labels



Confused by the dates on food packaging? You're not alone!

Date labels don't always mean what we think. Let's learn to trust our senses to judge whether food is still good to eat. Here's a brief overview.

Follow Your Senses

When it comes to determining if food is still good to eat, use your senses. If it looks spoiled or smells bad, compost it!

Date Labels Don't Indicate Safety

Date labels on food are for quality or freshness, not safety, according to the USDA. Some foods may be edible for longer. Regardless of date, always use your senses and best judgment before eating.

- ▶ **Sell By:**
Intended for inventory management in stores.
- ▶ **Freeze By:**
Suggests the date you should freeze the product to maintain peak quality.
- ▶ **Best If Used By/Best Before/Use By/Expires By:**
Date indicates when a product will have its best flavor or quality. It is not a safety date except for when used on infant formula as described below*.



* NOTE: Baby formula's "Use-By" date ensures the formula contains not less than the quantity of each nutrient as described on the label. Do not buy or use baby formula after its "Use-By" date.



Moving Beyond Date Labels

The information below is general guidance from the USDA on food quality and shelf life, and shares estimates of how long **food is edible past the date label**. Some foods may be edible for longer. Regardless of date, always use your senses and best judgment before eating.



PANTRY—shelf-stable items



Dried Beans,
Flour, Cereal
12 months



Dry Pasta,
Rice, Sugar
2 years



Canned Foods
up to **5 years**

- Keep pantry items cool and dry.
- Seal opened packages well and move to fridge if needed. Items will spoil faster once opened.
- Use older items first.



REFRIGERATOR—set refrigerator temperature to 40°F or below



Eggs
5 weeks



Butter
1-3 months



Milk and Yogurt
10 days



Cheese
up to **6 months**



Tofu
1 week

- Do not overpack the fridge—airflow ensures proper cooling.
- Foods sensitive to temperature, such as milk, cheese, and leftovers should not be stored in the door.



FREEZER—freeze food to extend its life



Bread
2-3 months



Leftovers
up to **6 months**



Raw meat
up to **12 months**



Fruit & Vegetables
up to **18 months**

- Freeze fresh ingredients and leftovers as soon as possible to preserve the highest quality and nutritional value.
- Date and label all foods before freezing.

* The guidelines for freezer storage are for quality only—frozen foods stored continuously at 0°F (-18°C) or below can be kept indefinitely.

For more ways to reduce food waste, save money,
and make the most of your food, visit StopFoodWaste.org

Disclaimer: Follow health and safety guidelines when storing, preparing, and consuming food. If in doubt, discard any food that appears spoiled or has an "off" smell. Compost the food and recycle or discard the packaging following local guidelines. For more detailed information consult FoodSafety.gov