

Food Dating Guide

Food Bank of Central New York often receives food items that are close to or past the date on their package. The majority of the time this food is still safe to eat! The Federal Government does not require dates nor does it regulate the dating of food. Dates are printed voluntarily on food packaging by the manufacturers. Manufacturers may use different date codes and terms to guarantee that consumers receive their product at peak quality. **These are not safety dates.** Once a product is past code date, it can still be good quality and safe to eat, thus many manufacturers donate it to food banks around that time. Food Bank of Central New York staff monitors this food to ensure that the quality remains good.

This guide explains the different dates found on food packages. With proper storage and sound, unopened packaging many products are safe beyond the date stamped on the package.

If you are ever in doubt, throw it out!

Understanding Dates on Food Packages

Many food products can be kept past their dates if they are handled properly. Understanding the different terms on food packages can help you decide if a food is still safe to eat. Here are some common terms explained:

Expiration date

- Baby Formula and medications are the only items required by federal law to have expiration dates. Do not use these items past the expiration date.
- Some states require eggs to have expiration dates, but they can still be safe 3-5 weeks after their expiration date.

Sell-by date

- This is the date the stores must sell the food by.
- The manufacturers take into account that the item will be stored at home after the Sell-by date. Since stores cannot sell products after the Sell-by date they usually donate the foods when they are close to this date.
- If the foods have been handled properly, they are still safe to eat and the quality is good.

Use-by date

- This date is the manufacturer's recommendation for how long the food will be at peak quality.
- After the use-by date, the food is still safe to eat but it will slowly begin to lose nutrients.

Pack date

- Date on which the product was packaged.
- This date is used by manufacturers for tracking purposes.
- These products have a long shelf life, have good quality, and can be safe to eat past the date.

Best-by date

- This date indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

Packing Codes

- Enable the manufacturers to rotate their stock and locate their products in the event of a recall.
- Codes appear as a series of letters and/or numbers and refer to the date the product was packed.
- The codes are not meant for the consumer to interpret as a "Best if Used By" date.

Shelf-Stable Products

Even though shelf-stable products and dry goods can be safe to eat past their dates, always examine the packaging according to the following guidelines.

Do Not Consume Food from Cans, Jars or Bags If:

- Leaking or stained
- Swollen
- Rusty
- Badly dented, crimped or pinched
- Container is cracked or torn
- Foul odor
- Safety seals are broken or missing
- Lids are loose or missing
- Foods exhibit changed color or odor - never taste suspicious foods!

Do Not Consume Food from Boxes If:

Inside Bag:

- Is torn or leaking
- Has moldy or foreign objects inside
- Seals are ripped

Box Without an Inside Bag:

- Is open or torn
- Has live or dead insects, webs, or droppings
- Is stained or wet

Refrigerated Products

Tips on Storing Refrigerated Food:

- Keep all cold food refrigerated at or below 41°F.
- Leave space for air to circulate between items in the refrigerator.
- Keep raw meats, poultry or fish on the bottom shelf and ready-to-eat food on top to avoid dangerous cross contaminations from drips.
- You can safely consume most homemade leftovers for up to seven days as long as it's kept at or below 41°F.

Frozen Products

Most foods can be kept indefinitely if they remains frozen at or below 0° F.

Tips on Storing Frozen Food:

- Do not accept frozen foods that have ice crystals or frozen liquids - this is evidence of the food being previously thawed and then refrozen. Freezer burn **does not make food unsafe** - it appears as grayish-brown leathery spots and just means that air came in contact with the food.
- **Safe thawing:** Never thaw foods at room temperature! Bacteria grows rapidly at room temperature and can make your food dangerous to eat. You can thaw food safely in your refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave.
- **All meat from Food Bank of Central New York has been frozen before its use-by date.**

Fresh Produce

Tips on Storing Fresh Produce:

- Most fruits and vegetables have the best quality when kept refrigerated. However, there are some exceptions.
- Tomatoes taste best if *not* refrigerated. Cold storage can cause them to become mealy.
- Bananas should not be refrigerated unless fully ripe, and then they should be used within 1-2 days. Refrigeration will cause banana skin to blacken, but the fruit will not ripen when cold.
- Unripe apples, avocados, mangoes, and stone fruit (plums, peaches, etc.) should be at room temperature until ripened, but these items should be refrigerated once ripe.
- Hardy vegetables like onions, garlic, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and winter squash should be stored in cool, dark, places outside the refrigerator. Store your potatoes and onions separate! Onions release a gas that can speed up sprouting in potatoes.
- Never store produce below raw meat, poultry or fish in the refrigerator.