



“The Facts About Dates on Food Products”

2026 Kansas FCE Education Program Year

Adapted from “How About A Date?” By Scott Teeples, 2022 Oregon FCE

Leader’s Guide and Member’s Handout.

Educational Goals:

- An understanding of where food dates came from and their purpose
- An understanding of truth, myths, and a misunderstanding of food dates
- Signs of food spoilage

Community Activities

- ❖ Displays at fairs or libraries

- ❖ A Contest which members can find the different labeling-
- ❖ Give the lesson and the "How About a Date Quiz" to others
- ❖ Involve legislation and get better labeling
- ❖ Use information in Hearth Fire Series #4: "Someone's in the Supermarket....Buying Safe Food"

If you've been throwing out food based on the freshness label, you're not alone. Education concerning food labels with dates is better now.

Where did those Date Labels Come From?

Date labels first began appearing in the decades following World War II, as American consumers increasingly shifted from shopping at small grocery stores and farms to supermarkets, featuring rows of packaged and curated options.

Confused by Date Labels on Packaged Foods?

If you've been throwing away food based on the freshness label, you're not alone. It is a widespread practice. In the absence of culinary information, people assume that any information they've been given must be the most important information. "In the absence of culinary information, people assume that any information they've been given must be the most important information" says Cher, journalist, and cookbook writer Tamar Adler, auth of "An Everlasting Meal: Cooking with Economy and Grace" A big part of the problem is that most of us don't believe we're capable of determining if food is good for us. Improved labeling has made it better, but we must educate ourselves as to what the labels mean.

According to the FDA, Americans are throwing away about 1/3 of our food(20 pounds per person per month) – about \$165 billion each year. Uncertainty about the meaning of food dates causes us to waste about 20% of our food.

The most common reason manufacturers apply date labels at their discretion is to inform consumers and retailers of the date by which they can expect food to retain its desired quality and flavor. Manufacturers are not required to obtain agency approval of voluntary quality-based date labels they use or specify how they arrived at the date they noted.

They are prohibited from placing false or misleading information on a label. Consumers should check the foods that are past their "Best if Used By" date to determine their quality. If products have changed noticeably in color consistency or texture, you may want to avoid eating them.

Quite a bit has happened over the years. Two major associations, the Consumer Brands Association and the Food Marketing Institute, put together a working group to design a standard date label that would work for both businesses and consumers. They came up with a 'best if used by' label for a quality date and 'use by' for a safety date. They got a bunch of their members to sign on to voluntarily shift to using

those dates. In other words, if a food won't decrease in safety but might decrease in quality, the manufacturer would use the "best if used by" label; if it might become unsafe to eat, they'd use the "use by" label. **Signs of food spoilage:**

- Smells "off"
- Moldy
- Different texture than what it should be
- Unpleasant taste



Common Types of Food Dates:

There are no uniform or universally accepted descriptions on food labels for calendar dates in the US, and as a result, there are a wide variety of phrases used. Studies have shown that this best conveys to consumers these products don't have to be discarded after the date if they are stored properly. *"Sell-By" date*

Let the store know how long to display the product for sale for inventory management

It is not a safe date

"Use-By" Date

The last date recommended for use of the product is while at peak quality. It is not a safe date except for when used on infant formula.

"Freeze-By" Date

When a product should be frozen to maintain peak quality, it is not a purchase or safety date.

"Best if Used By/Before" Date

Indicates when a product will be of the best quality or flavor. It is not a purchase or safety date

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) recommends that food manufacturers and retailers use a “Best if Used By” date.

Infant Formula

Federal regulations require a “Use-By” date on the product label of infant formula.

Consumption by this date ensures the formula contains no less than the quantity of each nutrient as described on the label. The formula must maintain an acceptable quality to pass

through an ordinary bottle nipple. Federal regulations do not require product dating except for infant formulas. **Do not buy or use baby formula after its “Use-By” date.**



Special Tips

- **We Need to Start Trusting Ourselves. Trust your nose, mouth, eyes, and your brain.**
- **We each need to rethink how we interact with food.**
- **We need to start trusting our senses to tell us if food is bad!**
- **We need to ask for clearer labels, advocate for better**
- **legislation, and talk to one another about what labels really mean.**
- **We need to move closer to food again, thinking of it less as a packaged consumer product and more as something natural that nourishes us as humans.**
- **Start sniffing what’s in your refrigerator before you chuck it!**

General guidelines for freshness

These items should be safe in the refrigerator or pantry for the following amount of time:

- **Eggs: go by “sell-by” date. 3-5 weeks. Store in the back of the refrigerator.**
- **Milk: 7 days. Store in the back of the refrigerator**

- Ground meat/poultry: 1-2 days
- Cooked meat/poultry: 3-4 days
- Lunch meat: 2 weeks unopened or 3-5 days opened
- Dry pasta; 1-2 years
- Steaks: 3-5 days
- Fresh poultry: 1-2 days
- Canned fruit: 12 to 18 months, or 5-7 days in the refrigerator after opening
- Rice and dried pasta: 2 years, or 3 to 4 days in the refrigerator after cooking

References and Credit Given to:

Hawaii FCE "What Do Food Expiration Dates Mean?" July 10, 2021

Scott Teeples, Oregon Association for Family and Community Education, wrote lesson 2022

"Safe Food Storage -The Refrigerator and Freezer" and "Safe Food Storage The Cupboard" obtain from www.ksre.k-state.edu

Food Safety Questions:

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline toll-free at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-68).

www.fda.gov (search food safety) -obtain Refrigerator & Freezer storage chart and pantry food storage chart: Common shelf life (4 charts)

The lie of "expired" food and the disastrous truth of America's food waste problem - Stop throwing your food away. Start sniffing what's in your refrigerator before you chuck it!

Every so often, we go through our refrigerator, check labels on the items and throw out anything that's a month, or a week, or maybe a few days past the date on the label.

Until there is a better solution, the best thing we can do is try to educate ourselves, families, and the community and change the way we shop for food.