



Feeding America San Diego

Food Safety Education Fact Sheet

Food Product Dating

What is dating?

"Open Dating" (use of a calendar date as opposed to a code) on a food product is a date stamped on a product's package to help the store determine how long to display the product for sale. It can also help the purchaser to know the time limit to purchase or use the product at its best quality. It is not a safety date. After the date passes, while it may not be of best quality, refrigerated products should still be safe if handled properly and kept at 40 °F (4.4 °C) or below for the recommended storage times listed on the chart (see below). If product has a "use-by" date, follow that date. If product has a "sell-by" date or no date, cook or freeze the product by the times on the chart below.

Types of Dates

A "**Sell-By**" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires.

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

A "**Use-By**" date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. The date has been determined by the manufacturer of the product.

"**Closed or coded dates**" are packing numbers for use by the manufacturer.

Safety After Date Expires

Except for "use-by" dates, product dates don't always pertain to home storage and use after purchase. "Use-by" dates usually refer to best quality and are not safety dates. Even if the date expires during home storage, a product should be safe, wholesome and of good quality if handled properly. See the accompanying refrigerator charts for storage times of dated products. If product has a "use-by" date, follow that date. If product has a "sell-by" date or no date, cook or freeze the product according to the times on the chart below.

Foods can develop an off odor, flavor or appearance due to spoilage bacteria. If a food has developed such characteristics, you should not use it for quality reasons.

If foods are mishandled, however, foodborne bacteria can grow and, if pathogens are present, cause foodborne illness — before or after the date on the package. For example, if hot dogs are taken to a picnic and left out several hours, they will not be safe if used thereafter, even if the date hasn't expired.

Other examples of potential mishandling are products that have been: defrosted at room temperature more than two hours; cross contaminated; or handled by people who don't practice good sanitation. Make sure to follow the handling and preparation instructions on the label to ensure top quality and safety.

What do can codes mean?

Cans must exhibit a packing code to enable tracking of the product in interstate commerce. This enables manufacturers to rotate their stock as well as to locate their products in the event of a recall.

These codes, which appear as a series of letters and/or numbers, might refer to the date or time of manufacture.

They aren't meant for the consumer to interpret as "use-by" dates. There is no book or Web site that tells how to translate the codes into dates.

Cans may also display "open" or calendar dates. Usually these are "best if used by" dates for peak quality.

Canned foods are safe indefinitely as long as they are not exposed to freezing temperatures, or temperatures above 90 °F (32.2° C). If the cans look ok, they are safe to use. Discard cans that are dented, rusted, or swollen. High-acid canned foods (tomatoes, fruits) will keep their best quality for 12 to 18 months; low-acid canned foods (meats, vegetables) for 2 to 5 years.

Storage Times

Since product dates aren't a guide for safe use of a product, how long can the consumer store the food and still use it at top quality? Follow these tips:

- If perishable, take the food home immediately after purchase and refrigerate it promptly. Freeze it if you can't use it within times recommended on chart.
- Once a perishable product is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires because foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely.

- Follow handling recommendations on product.
- Consult the following storage chart.

Refrigerator Home Storage (at 40 °F [4.4 °C] or below) of Fresh or Uncooked Products

If product has a "sell-by" date or no date, cook or freeze the product by the times on the following chart.

Refrigerator Storage of Fresh or Uncooked Products	
Product	Storage Times After Purchase
Poultry	1 or 2 days
Beef, Veal, Pork and Lamb	3 to 5 days
Ground Meat and Ground Poultry	1 or 2 days
Fresh Variety Meats (Liver, Tongue, Brain, Kidneys, Heart, Chitterlings)	1 or 2 days
Cured Ham, Cook-Before-Eating	5 to 7 days
Sausage from Pork, Beef or Turkey, Uncooked	1 or 2 days
Eggs	3 to 5 weeks

Refrigerator Home Storage (at 40 °F [4.4 °C] or below) of Processed Products Sealed at Plant

If product has a "sell-by" or no date, cook or freeze the product by the times on the following chart.

Refrigerator Storage of Processed Products Sealed at Plant		
Processed Product	Unopened, After Purchase	After Opening
Cooked Poultry	3 to 4 days	3 to 4 days
Cooked Sausage	3 to 4 days	3 to 4 days
Sausage, Hard/Dry, shelf-stable	6 weeks/pantry	3 weeks
Corned Beef, uncooked, in pouch with pickling juices	5 to 7 days	3 to 4 days
Vacuum-packed Dinners, Commercial Brand with USDA seal	2 weeks	3 to 4 days
Bacon	2 weeks	7 days
Hot dogs	2 weeks	1 week
Luncheon meat	2 weeks	3 to 5 days
Ham, fully cooked	7 days	slices, 3 days; whole, 7 days
Ham, canned, labeled "keep refrigerated"	9 months	3 to 4 days
Ham, canned, shelf stable	2 years/pantry	3 to 5 days
Canned Meat and Poultry, shelf stable	2 to 5 years/pantry	3 to 4 days