

What's the latest on food product dating?

The Grocery Manufacturers Association and the Food Marketing Institute recently asked their members to standardize quality dates that appear on food packages in an effort to curb the problem of food waste.

A 2013 [report](#) from the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic and the National Resource Defense Council estimated that 40 percent of food in the U.S. goes uneaten, resulting in waste of at least 160 billion pounds of food each year. At the same time, nearly 15 percent of U.S. residents struggle to put food on the table. The report argued that clear food product dating would reduce food waste and help to eliminate food insecurity, or the lack of enough food to stay healthy, in the country.

"Most food products carry dates that advise consumers when the product remains within a certain standard of quality set by the manufacturer," says Barbara Ingham, food safety specialist with the University of Wisconsin-Extension. "However, with the exception of infant formula, these dates are not linked to food safety. In most cases, food products maintain their quality well after the date marked on the package."

Consumers now see dates with these phrases:

- **"Best if Used By/Before."** This indicates when a product will have the best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- **"Sell-By."** This tells the store how long to display the product for sale for inventory management. It is not a safety date.
- **"Use-By."** This is the last date recommended to use a product at peak quality. It is not a safety date, except on infant formula.

GMA and FMI are asking companies to do away with the terms "Expires On" and "Sell By" and replace them with "Best if Used By." For some highly perishable products like lunch meat or raw oysters, manufacturers could put "Use By" on their products.

"Federal law does not require expiration dates on food," says Ingham. "As a food product passes its 'expiration' date, it may get stale, and some products, like milk, may go sour. But according to food safety experts, most spoiled foods, though unpalatable, aren't particularly hazardous."



According to the USDA, up to 30 percent of food may be lost or wasted at the retail or consumer level. One source of food waste arises from consumers or retailers throwing away wholesome food because of confusion about the meaning of dates displayed on the label.

GMA and FMI are attempting to reduce consumer confusion and wasted food by recommending the "Best if Used By" date be applied to most foods. "USDA indicates that research shows the 'Best if Used By' phrase conveys that the product will be of best quality if used by the date shown. Foods not exhibiting signs of spoilage should be wholesome and may be sold, purchased, donated and consumed beyond the labeled 'Best if Used By' date," Ingham says.

With the exception of infant formula, a product should still be safe and wholesome beyond its "Best If Used By" date as long as it is handled and stored properly. "For instance, pasteurized milk that is kept refrigerated and properly handled, should be safe to drink after the date marked on the container and can be consumed until it shows signs of spoilage," says Ingham.

The exception to food product dating is when a date is applied to infant formula. Because proper nutrition is vitally important for healthy development of an infant, infant formula should be removed from sale and discarded after the 'Use By' date marked on this product.

Consumers should remember that while food that is not properly handled may spoil even before the date marked, most foods will remain wholesome and tasty well after the date marked on the package.

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