

Shelf Life of Food

Oregon Food Bank often gives out food items that are “past date.” The dates on food labels can be confusing. The truth is, they often have little to do with food safety. Except for infant formula, product dating is not required by Federal regulations.

The date tells you how long the food will be at the best quality when unopened. Once a food is past that date, many stores and businesses donate it to food banks. Food Bank staff monitor this food to make sure the quality is good.

Important things to know



The only foods that are required by law to have expiration dates are

infant formula, supplements, and over-the-counter medications. Although the federal regulations do not include baby food, Feeding America requires its partners to discard baby food and infant formula once expired.



After the “use by” or “best by” date has passed,

you may start to notice gradual changes in the unopened product’s texture, color or flavor. But as long as you’ve been storing it properly, you can generally consume it beyond this date. Proper storage is 50 – 70°F for canned or dry food.



Many **canned and boxed products are safe**

to eat long after the date on the container, and the shelf life of refrigerated and frozen foods can be extended if they have been kept cold from the manufacturer to the consumer.



Once a perishable item is rapidly frozen, it is safe indefinitely when kept below 0°F, although the quality slowly goes down over time.

Immediately throw away any package that is open or leaking, regardless of date.

The best way to tell if an unopened shelf-stable food is still good is to simply smell and examine it first. **Always discard foods that have developed an off odor, flavor or appearance.**

When in doubt about the history or state of a food item, throw it out!

**Food safety work is equity work.
Everyone deserves access to safe food.**



Dates on Packaging

What do the dates on food packages mean?

Expiration Date (Examples: “Expires 2/15/22” or “Do not use after 2/15/22”)

- **Look for it on:** Infant formula, medicines, vitamins, yeast, baking powder.
- **What it means:** The only place you’re likely to encounter this type of date is on infant formula, medicine, or dietary supplements, which are the only food products on which the government regulates dates. You should always use the product before this expiration date has passed! Yeast and baking powder work less well after expiration but are safe to eat. Feeding America requires us to throw away expired infant formula and baby food.

Pack Date (Examples: “Packed on 2/15/22” or “192 VIG 2109”)

- **Look for it on:** Canned food, crackers, cookies, spices. They appear as a series of letters and/or numbers on the package, sometimes indicate the date or time of manufacture.
- **What it means:** This is the date the food was packaged. Packing codes help manufacturers and grocers rotate their stock and quickly locate products in the event of a recall. This food has no consume by advice listed, and usually little risk for food safety. Consume if it appears and smells as expected.

Sell By Date, or Pull Date (Example: “Sell by 2/15/22” or “Best by 2/15/22”)

- **Look for it on:** Refrigerated foods such as milk, yogurt, tofu, packaged salad, dips and meat.
- **What it means:** The date is a guide for stores to know how long they can display a particular product. If the food has been handled properly, you can still store it at home for some time beyond that date, and it is still safe to eat. Food bank staff monitor this food to ensure that the quality remains good. For instance, milk that has been continuously refrigerated will usually remain drinkable for about one week after the “sell by” date on the package.

Use By Date (Example: “Use by 2/15/22”)

- **Look for it on:** Refrigerated food such as meat, deli items and bagged spinach.
- **What it means:** Food must be distributed or frozen by this date. We recommend distributing frozen food within three months. Meats frozen on or before the use by date are safe indefinitely, but know that quality (taste, texture, color) will change after 12 months.

**Food safety work is equity work.
Everyone deserves access to safe food.**

