



Food Safety & Nutrition

Decoding Food Dates



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Do the dates on food packages puzzle you? What about those letters and numbers? If you are confused or puzzled – you are not alone.

There is no uniform or universally accepted system for food dating in the U.S. However, Washington law does require that foods that spoil within 30 days, including milk, cottage cheese, and eggs carry a pull date by which they are to be sold. This sell by date represents the last day to sell the product so you will have time to store and use it at home safely. In addition, some manufacturers choose to add dates on products such as snacks and cookies even though they are not required.

Here are some generally accepted definitions for food dates that may help you determine how long you want to store foods once you get them home.

- **Pull Date**

Example: “Sell By January 25”

Foods that use this date: milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, cream, eggs, lunchmeats, packaged salad mixes.

What does the date mean? Stores must remove these products by the date listed. The food will be safe to eat after this date if it has been refrigerated continually. Milk will usually be edible at least one week longer. Other foods like yogurt or eggs will keep more than one week beyond the date listed. If the food smells or tastes bad (“off”) or the seal has been broken, do not use it; otherwise, it is probably safe to eat.

- **Quality Assurance Dates**

Example: “Better if used by date shown”, “Exp. 1/25/01”

Foods that use this date: packaged mixes like macaroni and cheese, boxed soups, bakery products, cheese, some canned foods, cold cereals, peanut butter, mayonnaise.

What does the date mean? These foods have a long shelf life, but eventually they will begin to lose their flavor or develop off-flavors. The date listed is an estimate of how long the food will be of optimal quality. Quality is defined as smell, taste, and texture, not as safety. Therefore, after the date listed, the food may not taste as good, but it will still be safe. If the product smells or tastes bad, or if the seal on the package has been broken, it is best if you don’t use it.

- **Expiration Date**

Examples: “Expires 2/24/01”, “Do not use after 2/24/01”

Products that use this date: infant formula, baby food, vitamins, over-the-counter drugs, yeast, baking powder, cake mixes, pectin

What does this date mean? Although these products may be safe if consumed after this date, their usefulness and quality may be reduced. Infant formula, baby food, and over-the-counter drugs should never be consumed

after the expiration date because they may not function in the body as they are supposed to. Rising agents like yeast will be safe after this date, but may not be as effective.

- **Pack Dates**

Examples: Packed on 3/23/01”, “192 VIG 2109”

Foods with this date: canned fruits and vegetables, canned meat and fish, boxes of crackers and cookies, spices

What does this date mean? This is the date the product was packaged. Pack date is generally not intended for consumers but rather is used by manufacturers and retailers to track inventory, rotate items and locate items in case of recall. Sometimes it is written in code, as in the second example above. Neither example tells the consumer how long the food can be stored before it is eaten. However most canned foods have a long shelf life if stored in a dry, dark, and cool place (40-60 degree). Generally, for optimal quality, commercially canned foods should be consumed within 1 year. Canned foods will be safe (but may have changes in the taste and texture) for many years after this date. If the containers have bulges or dents then the product should be thrown away. Packages of crackers, cookies, and spices will be safe for long periods of time after the pack date, but may not be a flavorful. Any product with a broken seal or smells bad should not be eaten.

Understanding food dates is helpful as long as that’s combined with proper food handling and proper storage temperatures, which are just as critical to a product’s safety and quality. The dates alone are not a guarantee but they can be a helpful guideline.

For more information or food safety questions contact the WSU Extension office at 360-397-6060.

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