



SOUTH CAROLINA FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

Affiliated with
National Volunteer Outreach Network, Country Women's Council, U.S.A., Associated Country Women of the World
and in partnership with Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service

Times Up – What Do Those Dates on Food Packages Mean?

OBJECTIVE: Understand how to decipher dates on food packages.

LEARNING QUESTIONS:

1. What are the two types of food product dating?
2. Are dates required on food products?
3. Does it mean the product will be unsafe to use after that date?
4. How do I safely handle packaged foods to maintain their quality?

LESSON OVERVIEW (can be read to the audience or summarized)

I. Two Types of Food Product Dating

Open Dating – uses a calendar date instead of a code to help retailer determine how long to display a product for sale and to help the purchaser know when to use the product for best quality. Examples of open dating include:

- **Sell-By** -- date tells the retailer how long to display the product for sale.
- **Best if Used By (or Before)** -- date tells the consumer when to use for best flavor or quality.
- **Use-By** -- date tells the consumers when to use the product for peak quality.

Closed (or Coded) Dating – a series of letters and/or numbers created by the manufacturer so they can track product and/or they can recover product in the event of a recall. These codes might refer to the date or time of manufacture. There is not a system to creating the code, only the manufacturer can translate the codes into dates.

II. Is Food Product Dating Required by Law?

There is no uniform system used for food dating in the U.S. Except for infant formula and some baby food, product dating is not required by Federal regulations. However, if a calendar date is used, the date must include both the month and day of the month (and the year if it is a shelf-stable or frozen product). If a calendar date is shown, immediately adjacent to the date must be a phrase stating the meaning of the date, such as "sell-by" or "use before."

III. Safety after Food is Past Dated

Both open and closed dates refer to the product's best quality and not to its safety. Therefore, if a food product becomes past dated during home storage, it should be safe and of good quality if it had been handled properly and the package is intact and in good condition. Quality is not the same as safety. A poor quality food might be safe to eat, such as stale cereal, overripe fruit or soured pasteurized milk. Whereas, an unsafe food might be of good quality in terms of appearance and taste but be unsafe because it has a large number of microorganisms.

IV. Purchasing Guidelines

Only buy foods that are not past dated.

- Select packages that are not torn or broken; canned goods should be free of dents, cracks and bulging lids.
- Refrigerated food should feel cold and frozen food should be frozen solid. Purchase these foods last.
- Take perishable foods home quickly to refrigerate. If travel time will exceed one hour or it is warm outside, pack perishable foods in a cooler with ice and keep in the passenger area of the car.

V. Storage Guidelines

Practice first in, first out. This means using old products first, and new products later. Put the newly purchased products in back of products already in storage. It might help to write purchase dates on products without "open dates" on the package.

Refrigerator:

- Use a thermometer to check temperature; it must be between 34°F and 40°F at all times.
- Wrap raw meat and poultry so they do not leak and contaminate other foods. Place the store packages in a plastic bag or place the package on a plate to contain any juices. Store below cooked or ready-to-eat food.
- 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 continuously frozen are safe indefinitely.

Freezer:

- Keep freezer temperature at or below 0°F.
- Use moisture-proof, freezer-weight wrap. Examples are foil, freezer bags and freezer paper. Label and date all packages.

Pantry:

- Storage cabinets should be cool and dry. Storage areas near oven ranges, hot water pipes or heating ducts should not be used because heat and moisture can cause a food to lose its quality more rapidly.
- High temperature or humidity may reduce storage time considerably.
- Insect infestation can occur in any home. Susceptible foods include cereals, flour, seeds, baking mixes, spices, candy, dried fruits and dry pet foods. Avoid purchasing damaged packages of foods and keep cupboard shelves clean. Storing food in tightly sealed glass, metal or rigid plastic containers may help.

Pantry foods will probably be safe beyond recommended storage time, but eating quality (flavor and texture) and nutritive value will be reduced.

ACTIVITIES:

Activity 1

Show two food packages – one a shelf-stable food (i.e. can of green beans or box of macaroni and cheese) and another with an open dating system (i.e. gallon milk, loaf of bread, or packaged pre-sliced deli meats). Have participants locate the “dates” on the package and discuss what they mean.

Activity 2

Show three product packages that are past dated (i.e. carton of eggs, gallon of milk, and box of cereal). Ask participants if they would eat them and why or why not?

Activity 3

Make copies of the handout and distribute.

STORAGE TIMES FOR REFRIGERATED, FROZEN AND SHELF-STABLE PACKAGED FOODS

REFRIGERATED AND FROZEN PACKAGED FOODS		
Food	Refrigerator	Freezer
* Storage by this method is not recommended due to safety or quality issues.		
Dairy		
Fresh Milk	5-7 days	*
Buttermilk	1-2 weeks	*
Canned milk (opened)	3-5 days	*
Yogurt, cottage cheese	7 days	*
Hard cheese	6-12 weeks	6-12 months
Cheese spreads	3-4 weeks	*
Ice cream	*	2 months
Eggs		
Fresh in shell	3 weeks	*
Meats, Fresh		
Beef roasts, steaks	3-5 days	6-12 months
Ground beef or stew	1-2 days	3-4 months
Pork roasts, chops	3-5 days	4-6 months
Sausage	1-2 days	1-2 months
Chicken or turkey	1-2 days	9-12 months
Meats, Cooked		
Smoked sausage, whole ham (fully cooked)	7 days	1-2 months
Ham slices (fully cooked)	3-4 days	1-2 months
Hot dogs, luncheon meats (unopened)	2 weeks	1-2 months
Hot dogs, luncheon meats (opened)	3-7 days	1-2 months

Storage Times for Shelf-Stable Packaged Foods (50°F to 70°F)

Food	Recommended Storage Time
Canned fruits, tomatoes, pickles	12-18 months
Canned meats and vegetables	2-5 years
Staples*	
Nonfat dry milk	1 year
Pasta	1-2 years
Rice	1 year
Shortening	2 years
Sugar, granulated	Indefinitely
Sugar, brown or powdered	18 months
Vegetable oil	1 year
White flour	10-15 months
Whole wheat flour	3 months (best in refrigerator or freezer)
Wild rice	6 months
Packaged Foods*	
Baking mix (biscuit, cake)	6 months
Cereals	12 months
Dried Foods*	
Dried apricots	3 months (refrigerate after opening)
Dried prunes, raisins	9 months (refrigerate after opening)
Dried peas and beans	1 year
Herbs, Spices & Condiments*	
Salt, cream of tartar	Indefinitely
Ground spices and herbs	2-3 years
Whole spices	4-5 years
Tabasco, vinegar, Worcestershire sauce	30 months
Beverages (sealed, unopened)*	
Bottled water	2-5 years

Storage Times for Shelf-Stable Packaged Foods (50°F to 70°F)

Food	Recommended Storage Time
Juices	12-18 months
Soft drinks	8 months
Miscellaneous*	
Chocolate	2 years
Chocolate chips, cocoa	18 months
Coffee (canned)	12 months
Nuts (unshelled)	6-12 months
Peanut butter	3-4 months (best refrigerated)
Tapioca	4 years
Tea	18 months
Bread & Cakes**	Use within 3-7 days or freeze.