



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
SCFCL website: <http://www.scfcl.com>

Leader Training Guide

Food Product Dating: Understanding Labels, Reducing Waste, and Staying Safe

Objective:

Upon completion of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Explain the difference between **open** and **closed** (coded) dating.
- Interpret common label phrases such as "**Best if Used By**," "**Use-By**," and "**Sell-By**."
- Identify which foods federal law requires to carry a date (infant formula) and which are not.
- Apply safe-storage timelines for refrigerated, frozen, and shelf-stable foods to help prevent foodborne illness and food waste.

Lesson Overview/Introduction:

Roughly **30 percent of America's food supply is lost or wasted** at the retail and consumer levels, much of it simply because people misunderstand the dates printed on packages. To curb confusion—and keep wholesome food out of landfills—the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) recommends that manufacturers and retailers use the single phrase "**Best if Used By**" to indicate peak quality. Product dating is *voluntary* for meat, poultry, and egg products (except infant formula). When companies choose to add a date, they must do so truthfully and in a manner that is not misleading.

Lesson:

Key Points to Cover:

1. Open vs. Closed Dating

- *Open* dates are meant for **consumers** and appear as calendar dates with phrases like "Best if Used By."
- *Closed* or *coded* dates are packing codes used primarily by manufacturers and retailers for stock rotation.

2. What Does the Phrase Mean

- **Best if Used By/Before** – quality indicator, *not* safety.
- **Use-By** – last Date for peak quality (except for infant formula, where it also relates to nutrient adequacy).
- **Sell-By** – guidance for retailers on how long to display the product.
- **A Freeze-By Date-** means when you should freeze a product to maintain its peak quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- **Closed Date-** is a code that consists of a series of letters and/or numbers to identify the Date and time of production.

3. Dating Requirements

- Only infant formulas are federally required to bear a "Use-By" Date for safety and nutrient reasons.
- FSIS-regulated foods may carry dates voluntarily; if they do, the month, day, and the year must also appear on shelf-stable or frozen items.

4. When Is Food Unsafe?

- **Spoilage organisms** affect quality (off-odor, flavor, texture) but not safety. Food spoilage can occur much faster if you don't handle or store the food properly.
- **Pathogenic bacteria** grow when you mishandle the food (time/temperature abuse), regardless of the Date, and cause foodborne illness. For example, if you take a cold chicken salad to a picnic and leave it at a temperature higher than 40 degrees F for more than two hours, bacteria multiply and cause foodborne illness. So, you should not consume the salad later.
- **If food is not showing any signs of spoilage**, then it should be wholesome and may be sold, purchased, donated, and consumed beyond the label "Best if Used By" Date.

5. How do date labels impact Food Waste

The date labels confuse the consumer and can cause the discarding of wholesome food. Consumers need to understand that the dates are for food quality and not for food safety. Foods are safe to eat regardless of the Date if

they do not show any signs of spoilage. Food waste can be reduced or avoided by planning meals, storing food properly, and reusing leftovers.

Activity 1 – "Date Detective"

Give each participant three empty packages or high-resolution photos with different label dates. In small groups, have them:

- Identify the type of date-'Best if Used By'/Before', 'Sell By', 'Use By', or 'Freeze By'
- Decide whether the food would still be wholesome if stored properly past that Date.

Share findings with the whole class.

Activity 2 – "Ask the FoodKeeper"

Introduce the free **USDA FoodKeeper app** (downloadable on phones). Participants search for two foods of their choice and record:

- Recommended storage times in the fridge, freezer, and pantry.
- Whether the dating phrase on their sample matches the app's advice.

Discuss how using the app can complement — rather than replace — date labels.

Activity 3 – "Waste-Less Challenge"

- In pairs, brainstorm household strategies to reduce food waste related to misunderstood dates (e.g., meal planning, first-in/first-out storage, freezing extras). Groups report back and compile a master list on a flip chart.

Lesson Summary:

Date labels signal quality, not safety. Except for infant formula, federal law does not mandate dates; manufacturers add them voluntarily. Understanding the meaning behind "Best if Used By," "Use-By," and "Sell-By" empowers consumers to evaluate food based on storage time, appearance, odor, and texture—saving money and reducing waste without compromising safety.

Suggested Activities:

- **Warm-Up:** Ask participants to write down what they *think* "Use-By" means. Compare answers, then reveal the FSIS definition.
- **Lesson Activities:** Complete Activities 1–3 (highlighted above).

Suggested Supplies:

- Sample food packages or high-quality images showing a variety of date labels.
- Each participant will use an Internet-enabled device to demonstrate the USDA FoodKeeper app.
- Flip chart or whiteboard and markers

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Sources/References:

- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service. **"Food Product Dating."** [fsis.usda.gov](https://www.fsis.usda.gov)
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, FSIS. **Food Product Dating** (consumer factsheet, PDF)

Additional Resources:

- FSIS. Guidance on Food Labeling: Food Product Dating.
- USDA & Cornell University. **FoodKeeper App** (iOS/Android).
- Real Simple. **"Is Your Food Still Safe to Eat?"** (easy-to-read storage chart).