



Interpreting Label Dates

Confused about the different dates you see stamped on food packages? These dates are commonly misunderstood as “expiration dates,” a date that signifies the item is no longer safe to eat. This is in fact not true for most items. Many non-perishable items are safe to eat long after the date on their packaging, and the shelf life of refrigerated and frozen foods can be extended if they are handled properly. Baby food and formula and over-the-counter medications are the only items that are required by federal law to have an actual expiration date.

Here are explanations of different code dating you may see on food packages:

Expiration Date- (“Expires 1/1/11”, “Do not use after 1/1/11”)

- Look for it on: Baby food and formula, medicines, vitamins, yeast, baking powder.
- What it means: Do not distribute or consume infant formula, baby food, vitamins or medicines after the expiration date! Yeast and baking powder work less effectively after expiration, but are still safe to eat.

Sell By Date - (“Sell by 1/1/11”, also called “Pull Date”)

- Look for it on: Refrigerated foods such as milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, eggs, lunch meat, packaged salad mixes.
- What it means: This tells the store how long to display the product for sale. If the food has been handled properly, it may still be safe to eat past this date.

Use By or Quality Date - (“Best if used by 1/1/11” or “Use before 1/1/11”)

- Look for it on: Crackers, cookies, cereals, canned goods, and other dry, shelf stable foods.
- What it means: This date is the manufacturer’s recommendation for how long the food will be at peak quality. After the quality date, the food is still safe to eat but slowly begins to lose nutrients and the quality begins to lessen.

Pack Date or Coded Date - (“Packed on 1/1/11”, “A70319R 23:16”)

- Look for it on: Canned food, crackers, cookies, spices, and other dry shelf-stable foods.
- What it means: These dates represent the date on which the food was packaged or processed for sale. They are not intended for consumers but rather are used by manufacturers and retailers to track inventory, rotate food on shelves, and locate items in case of a recall. Since dates are printed at the manufacturer’s discretion, their meanings may be different for each product line, and therefore be difficult to decipher. Usually this food is safe to eat for a long time past the date, as long as the packaging is not damaged.

The suggested shelf life (how long an item is considered “good” past the code date) varies drastically from product to product, even between similar types of items. For example, some shelf-stable items can be kept for 3-5 years past the date, while others might only be good for 1 month after the date. Because it is impractical to memorize hundreds of different items’ shelf lives, we have created a more user-friendly list of broad category shelf life guidelines. It is important to remember that these guidelines are in fact just that – guidelines! They are primarily intended to ensure quality, not safety. The product should be safe as long as the product has been properly handled and stored, and does not have significant damage. The following should be used for training staff and volunteers who will be inspecting donations.



Food Item	Shelf Life After Code Date
SHELF STABLE	
Canned good (low acidity)	3 years
Canned good (high acidity)	18 months
Dry beans, pasta, rice, ramen	2 years
Boxed/bagged goods- cereal, crackers, mixes, etc.	1 year
Sauces, condiments, dressings	1 year
Beverages	1 year
Chips	2 months
Mayonnaise, cream based items	3 months
Baby food/adult formula	discard after date
FROZEN	
All assorted meats/poultry	2 months
Fruit, vegetables	6 months
Ice cream	2 months
DAIRY/COOLER	
Juice	3 weeks
Milk (except borden)	1 week (discard Borden products after date)
Cheese	1 week (soft) 1 month (hard)
Eggs	3 weeks
Yogurt, sour cream, dips	2 weeks
Salsa, pesto	discard after date
Hummus	1 week
Prepared dishes or meals	3 days
Salads	3 days
PRODUCE	
Packaged produce (bagged lettuce, etc.)	discard after date
Cut produce	discard after date
BREAD/PASTRY	
Fresh	4 days
Frozen	1 month
Containing cream	throw away if not kept refrigerated/frozen

