Date labeling Confusion, Food Safety, and Food Waste

The United States Department of Agriculture estimates that about 133 billion pounds of food is wasted annually. This loss has an estimated $161.6 billion in retail value. That’s $523 worth of food per person per year!

Unfortunately, in the US there is no uniform system used for food dating. Some of the dates you might see include:

- A "Sell-By" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. For best quality, you should buy the product before this date.

- A "Best if Used By (or Before)" date is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

- A "Use-By" date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. The date has been determined by the manufacturer of the product.

These dates cannot be relied upon as an indicator of food safety because there are too many variations in transportation and storage conditions. If foods are mishandled, foodborne bacteria can grow and cause foodborne illness — before or after the date on the package. For example, if hot dogs are taken to a picnic and left out several hours, they will not be safe to use later, even if the date hasn’t expired.

Egg cartons with the USDA grade shield on them must display the "pack date" (the day that the eggs were washed, graded, and placed in the carton). Many eggs reach stores only a few days after the hen lays them. When a "sell-by" date appears on a carton bearing the USDA grade shield, the code date may not exceed 45 days from the date of pack. Always purchase eggs before the "Sell-By" or "EXP" date on the carton. For best quality, use eggs within 3 to 5 weeks of the date you purchase them. The "sell-by" date will usually expire during that length of time, but the eggs are perfectly safe to use.

Infant formula is the exception to the rule. Federal regulations require a "use-by" date on the product label of infant formula under FDA inspection. If consumed by that date, the formula must contain not less than the quantity of each nutrient as described on the label. Also, if stored too long, liquid formula can separate and clog the nipple.

Because of the confusion over code dates, use by dates, and expiration dates, some food manufacturers use a closed dating system, such as a Julian date. A Julian date usually indicates the day of processing using is a 3 digit number corresponding to the day of the
year. Most consumers are unaware that this 3 digit number corresponds to a date and are thus pay it no attention on the package.

Since product dates aren’t a guide for safe use of a product, how long can the consumer store the food and still use it at top quality? Follow these tips:

- Purchase the product before the date expires.
- If perishable, take the food home immediately after purchase and refrigerate it promptly. Freeze it if you can’t use it within the recommended timeframe.
- Once a perishable product is frozen, it doesn’t matter if the date expires because foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely.
- Follow handling recommendations on product.
- Consult the Alabama Cooperative Extension System publication “Better-Safe-Than-Sorry Food Storage Chart” for a detailed list of food storage times.

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