

Confused by Date Labels on Packaged Foods?

Here's how to know if your food is still good to eat while also reducing waste in your home.



The phrase "Best if Used By" helps clarify that the date label is about quality, not safety, and that if stored properly, products do not necessarily have to be discarded after the date.

[Español \(/consumers/articulos-en-espanol/confundido-por-la-fecha-en-las-etiquetas-de-los-alimentos-empaquetados\)](#)

Between the food industry and consumers, Americans are throwing out about a third of our food — about \$161 billion worth each year.

“Imagine this: You go to your favorite supermarket and come out with three bags full of groceries. Before you get in your car, you toss one of those bags in the garbage. Sound ridiculous? Of course it does, but that’s in essence what food waste looks like every day across our country,” says Frank Yiannas, the FDA’s Deputy Commissioner for Food Policy and Response.

Consumer uncertainty about the meaning of the dates that appear on the labels of packaged foods is believed to contribute to about 20 percent of food waste in the home. That’s not surprising when you consider the variety of terms used with date labels, such as “use before,” “sell by,” “expires on,” and many more.

To help dispel this confusion, the FDA is supporting the food industry's efforts (</media/125114/download>) to standardize the use of the term “Best if Used By” on its packaged-food labeling if the date is simply related to optimal quality — not safety. Studies have shown that this best conveys to consumers that these products do not have to be discarded after the date if they are stored properly. “We expect that over time, the number of various date labels will be reduced as industry aligns on this ‘Best if Used By’ terminology,” says Yiannas. “This change is already being adopted by many food producers.”

The FDA's efforts are part of a White House initiative called Winning on Reducing Food Waste. And part of this collaboration between the FDA, the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Agriculture involves educating consumers on ways to reduce food loss and waste, and how to do it safely without risking illness from consuming spoiled food.

Most Date Labels Are Not Based on Exact Science

Manufacturers generally apply date labels at their own discretion and for a variety of reasons. The most common is to inform consumers and retailers of the date up to which they can expect the food to retain its desired quality and flavor. The key exception to this general rule is for infant formula products. These products are required to bear a “Use By” date, up to which the manufacturer has confirmed that the product contains no less than a minimum amount of each nutrient identified on the product label, and that the product will be of an acceptable quality.

Date labels are generally not required on packaged foods. While manufacturers are prohibited from placing false or misleading information on a label, they are not required to obtain agency approval of the voluntary quality-based date labels they use or specify how they arrived at the date they've applied.

According to Kevin Smith, Senior Advisor for Food Safety in the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, the “Best if Used By” labels you see on packaged foods relate to the quality of the product, but that predicting when a food will no longer be of adequate quality for consumption is not an exact science.

Smith advises consumers to routinely examine foods in their kitchen cabinets or pantry that are past their “Best if Used By” date to determine if the quality is sufficient for use. If the products have changed noticeably in color, consistency or texture, consumers may want to avoid eating them.

Additionally, there are resources available online for consumers with questions about how long to keep perishable foods, including meat, seafood and dairy products:

- The FoodKeeper App (<https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/foodkeeperapp/index.html>), designed to promote understanding of food and beverage storage to maximize freshness and quality.
- The Refrigerator and Freezer Storage Chart on page 4 of the FDA's Food Facts brochure (<https://www.fda.gov/media/101389/download>), providing more information about which products to refrigerate or freeze, and for how long.

Waste Not: Advice on How to Reduce Food Waste

The FDA is working with federal partners and other stakeholders to help consumers better understand the variety of actions they can take to reduce food waste. The FDA's Food Waste and Loss page (</food/consumers/food-loss-and-waste>) links to resources from the FDA, EPA and USDA.

Other ways to reduce waste include:

- Refrigerate peeled or cut vegetables for freshness, quality and safety.
- Use the freezer as your friend. It's a great way to store many foods to retain their quality until you are ready to eat them.
- Avoid bulk and impulse purchases, especially of produce and dairy products that have a limited shelf life.
- When eating out, if you're not terribly hungry, request smaller portions. Bring your leftovers home, and refrigerate or freeze them within two hours.

For more tips, visit the FDA's Tips to Avoid Food Waste (</food/consumers/tips-reduce-food-waste>) page.

“Reducing food waste is a shared responsibility, and consumers have an especially important role to play,” says Yiannas. “The FDA is committed to providing the information they need to make safe and sound decisions for their family. Food is too important to waste.”