

Food Date Labeling and How to Reduce Waste



Dates on food packaging can be confusing. This guide can help you determine if the food is safe to eat.

Much of the food we provide has been donated by food companies. Donated food may have damaged packaging. Fresh foods may look less perfect than what you see in stores. We carefully check donations to remove food that may be unsafe because of damage, spoilage, or rough handling.

What is the law on food dates?

There are no federal laws requiring dates on food, except for infant formula. It is like medicine that loses effectiveness after a certain time. **Infant formula is the only food product with an “expiration date.”** *We do not distribute infant formula past its expiration date.*

Connecticut law requires a “sell by date” on dairy products. Dairy products are safe to use after their “sell by date.” The date helps stores manage inventory. It allows time for a product to reach stores and to stay fresh for sale. **Fresh milk is usable for about a week after its “sell by” date. Other dairy products can last longer.** Refrigerate dairy products as directed to get the most life from them. *We distribute dairy products after the “sell by date” and allow the consumer to use their senses of taste and smell to determine the quality of the product.*

We distribute other products that may be past their “sell by,” “best before” or “use before” dates. These products remain safe to eat if properly stored but taste or appearance might begin to change after that date.

Keep in mind these facts about dates you might find on packaging.

Frozen Foods:

Donated meat was frozen before the “sell by” date. Kept frozen, it will be safe to eat **indefinitely**. The quality may change with time. Food that is frozen a very long time may get “freezer burn,” which can affect taste and appearance. **Ice crystals or frost on meats and brown coloring on beef do not mean it has spoiled.** Beef naturally changes from red to brown as it is exposed to oxygen. Use smell or touch to guide you; an “off-smell” or a slimy feel to meat mean it is spoiled.

Frozen meals or frozen vegetables that were safe to eat when frozen remain safe **indefinitely** when kept frozen. Most keep their taste and quality for **6 to 18 months beyond code date**.

Shelf-Stable Food in cans, bottles, jars, or boxes:

Cereals, canned vegetables, canned fruits, dried beans and other shelf-stable foods may begin to lose top quality and taste after the code date, especially once opened. **Unopened, shelf-stable food remains safe indefinitely.**

Sources and resources for more information:

- Food product dating information from the USDA
<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/food-product-dating>
- Information from the USDA about the color of meat and poultry
<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/color-meat-and-poultry>