



Product Dating and Shelf Life Guidelines

Product dating on food labels is provided by the manufacturer to indicate peak freshness and quality. Product dating was never intended to serve as an indicator of food safety. In fact, most foods, when kept in optimal storage conditions, are safe to consume and maintain an acceptable level of quality well past the label date.

This document provides recommended guidelines for the review and interpretation of product dating on food labels. It should not be used to evaluate the relative safety of the product.

Types of Dates as Seen on Packaged Food Products

Expiration Date or Use-By Date for baby formula and baby food – DO NOT USE BEYOND THIS DATE	Federal regulations require a “use by” date on the product label of infant formula under FDA inspection. If used by that date, the formula must contain not less than the quantity of each nutrient as described on the label. Formula must maintain an acceptable quality to pass through an ordinary bottle nipple. If stored too long, formula can separate and clog the nipple.
Sell-By	Tells the store how long to display the product for sale.
Best if Used By (or Before)	Recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
Use-By	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.
Closed or Coded Dates	Packing numbers for use by the manufacturer.

The Product Dating and Shelf Life Guidelines should be used as a guidance to provide an approximation of shelf life after the code date. Always visibly inspect food products prior to use. Do not consume if:

- Container is leaking or staining
- Container or can is swollen
- Can is rusty and perforated, or nearly perforated Container is cracked or punctured
- Badly dented, crimped or pinched edge or seam of can
- Food is exhibiting a foul odor or change of color
- Safety seals are missing or broken
- Lids are loose or missing
- Interior packaging of boxed item is torn or ripped
- Defects which provide evidence that the container has lost its hermetic seal: holes, fractures, punctures, product leakage, etc.
- Refer to the “Classification of Visible External Can Defects” as published by AOAC International in Cooperation with the Food and Drug Administration

Shelf Stable Food Items

Food items should be stored off the floor, either on a pallet or shelf. Storage area should be maintained clean, cool and dry. Extremely hot (over 100°F) and cold (below 30°F) temperatures can damage canned goods and shorten shelf life. Stock should always be rotated using the First In First Out (FIFO) methodology.

Shelf Stable Food Items	Shelf Life After Code Date
Baby Food	
Cereal: dry mixes	Expiration date on package
Food in jars, cans	Expiration date on package
Formula	Expiration date on package
Juice	1 year
Canned Food	Shelf Life After Code Date
Beans	3 years
Fish: salmon, tuna, sardines, mackerel	3 years
Frosting, canned	10 months
High-acid foods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fruit (including applesauce, juices) ▪ Pickles, sauerkraut ▪ Baked beans w/mustard w/vinegar ▪ Tomatoes, tomato-based soups & sauces 	1 – 2 years
Low-acid foods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gravy, soups/broths that aren't tomato based ▪ Pasta, stew, cream sauces ▪ Vegetables (not tomatoes) 	2 – 3 years
Meat: beef, chicken, pork, turkey	2-3 years
Pie filling	3 years
Aseptically-Packaged Products	Shelf Life After Code Date
UHT Milk	1 year
Broth: beef, chicken or vegetable	3 years
Soup	3 years
Fruits	3 years
Vegetables	3 years
Condiments, Sauces, Syrups	Shelf Life After Code Date
Barbeque Sauce (bottled)	
Frosting, canned	
Gravy (dry mix envelopes)	
Honey	2 years – remains safe after crystallization. To use, simply immerse closed container in hot (not boiling) water until honey liquefies.
James, jellies, preserves	18 months
Ketchup, cocktail, or chili sauce: jar, bottle or packet	18 months
Mayonnaise: jar, bottle or packet	3-6 months
Olives	18-24 months
Pickles	1 year canned 2 years, jarred – discard if inside of lid is rusty upon opening
Salad dressings; bottled	1 year
Salsa: bottled	12-18 months
Spaghetti sauce, canned	18 months
Spaghetti sauce, jarred	18 months

Syrup, chocolate	2 years
Syrup, corn	2 years
Syrup, pancake	2 years
Vinegar	2 years
Worcestershire sauce	2 years
Dry Goods	Shelf Life After Code Date
Baking mix, pancake	9 months
Baking mixes (brownie, cake, muffin, etc.)	12-18 months
Baking powder	18 months
Baking soda	Indefinite if kept dry
Beans, dried	1 year
Bouillon: beef or chicken	12-24 months
Bouillon: vegetable	12-24 months
Bread, commercially prepared (including rolls)	3-5 days at room temperature 3 months stored frozen <i>*Homemade breads may have shorter shelf life due to lack of preservatives</i>
Cakes, commercially prepared	2-4 days at room temperature Several months frozen
Candy (all, including chocolate)	9 months, caramel 18 months, chocolate 36 months, hard candy
Casserole Mix	9-12 months
Cereal, cold	1 year
Cereal, hot	1 year
Cookies	4 months
Cornmeal	1 year at room temp 2+ years frozen
Crackers	8 months Except graham crackers, 2 months
Flour, white (all purpose or self-rising)	6 months Keeps longer if refrigerated or frozen
Flour, whole wheat	6 months Keeps longer is refrigerated or frozen
Fruit, dried	6 months
Macaroni and Cheese, mix	9-12 months
Nuts, out of shell	6-12 months, bagged 12-24 months, canned
Nuts, in shell	6-12 months
Oatmeal	12 months
Oil, olive, vegetable, salad	6 months
Pasta, dry (egg noodles)	2-3 years
Pasta, dry (no egg)	2-3 years
Peanut Butter	18 months
Popcorn, kernels	2 years
Popcorn, commercially popped and bagged	2-3 months
Popcorn, microwave packets	1 year
Potato chips	2 months
Potatoes, mashed, instant flakes	1 year
Pretzels	6-8 months
Pudding, prepared/shelf stable	1 week

Rice, brown	1 year
Rice, white	2 years
Rice-based mixes	6 months
Shortening, vegetable	8-12 months
Spices	Up to 4 years, whole spices Up to 2 years, ground spices Spices lose their flavor over time but remain safe to use indefinitely
Stuffing mix	9-12 months
Sugar, brown (light or dark)	18 months
Sugar, confectioners	18 months
Sugar, white	2+ years
Sugar substitute	2 years
Toaster pastries	6 months, fruit 9 months, no fruit
Tortillas	3 months, shelf or refrigerator 6 months, freezer Do not use if they develop mold or harden
Shelf Stable Beverages	Shelf Life After Code Date
Cocoa Mixes	36 months
Coffee creamer, liquid shelf stable	9-12 months
Coffee creamer, powdered	2 years
Coffee, ground	2 years
Coffee, instant	1-2 years
Coffee, whole bean	1 year, vacuum packed
Instant breakfast	6 months
Juice, bottle, shelf stable	9 months
Juice, box	4-6 months
Juice, canned	18 months
Juice concentrate, shelf stable	
Milk, evaporated	1 year
Milk, non-fat dry	1 year
Milk, shelf stable UHT	6 months
Milk, sweetened condensed	1 year
Nutritional aid supplements (Boost, Ensure, etc.)	1 year
Rice milk, shelf stable	6 months
Carbonated beverages (soda/seltzer water)	3 months, bottles (all)
Soy milk, shelf stable	6 months
Tea, bagged	18 months
Tea, instant	3 years
Tea, loose leaf	2 years
Water	Indefinite, store in a cool, dark place away from chemicals
Water, flavored	Indefinite, store in a cool, dark place away from chemicals

Refrigerated Food Items

Perishable food items must be stored at 40°F or below until distribution. Leave proper space in refrigeration unit for air circulation. Stock should always be rotated using the First In First Out (FIFO) methodology.

Dairy and Cooler Items	Refrigerated (40°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Alternative milk beverage, soy, rice, nut	7 days	
Butter	2-3 months	1 year
Buttermilk	14 days	Freezes poorly
Cheese trays	2 weeks	Do not freeze
Cheese, Cottage	14 days	Freezes poorly
Cheese, Cream	14 days	Freezes poorly
Cheese, Deli sliced	3-4 weeks	6-8 months
Cheese, hard	6 months	6-8 months
Cheese, soft	1-2 weeks	6 months
Cheese, processed sliced, shredded, string	3-4 weeks	6 months
Cheese, ricotta	7 days	Freezes poorly
Coffee creamer, dairy	3 weeks	Follow label instructions
Cream, Half & Half	5 days	4 months, use for cooking
Cream, Heavy	10 days	3-4 months, use for cooking
Cream, Light	1 week	3-4 months, use for cooking
Crust, pie or pizza ready to bake	Sell-by date	2 months
Dips, made with sour cream	2 weeks	Do not freeze
Dough, biscuit	2 days	Do not freeze
Dough, bread or pizza	2 days	Do not freeze
Dough, cookie	7 days	2-3 months
Egg Nog	5 days	6 months
Eggs, hardboiled	1 week	Do not freeze
Eggs, in shell	4-5 weeks	Do not freeze
Eggs, pasteurized carton egg substitute	10 days	1 year
Eggs, pasteurized carton real eggs, unopened	10 days	1 year
Eggs, whites or yolks	2-4 days	12 months
Hummus	5 days	Follow label instructions
Fruit, fresh cut	Use by date	Do not freeze
Juice, purchased refrigerated	3 weeks	8-12 months
Margarine	6 months	12 months
Milk	5 days	
Pasta, fresh	1-2 days	2 months
Pudding, purchased refrigerated	3 days	Do not freeze
Salad dressing, refrigerated	3 months	Do not freeze
Salsa, fresh	3 days	Do not freeze
Sauces, fresh – pesto, alfredo	7 days	
Sour cream	14 days	Freezes poorly
Tofu	1 week	5 months
Whipped Cream, aerosol	3-4 weeks	
Whipped topping, aerosol	3 months	
Whipped topping, non-dairy tub	2 weeks	14 months
Yogurt	10-14 days	1-2 months

Frozen Food

Once a perishable item is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires – foods kept frozen are safe indefinitely, though the quality slowly deteriorates over time. Frozen foods should be stored at 0°F or below to maintain proper shelf life and overall quality.

Items Purchased Frozen	Frozen (0°F or below)
Bread, Bagels	3 months
Chicken, nuggets/patties	2 months
Desserts, frozen baked goods	3-4 months
Desserts, frozen cream pies	1-2 months
Dinners: pies, casseroles, shrimp, ham, pork or sausage	3-4 months
Dinners: beef, turkey, chicken or fish	6 months
Dough, bread	1 month; longer storage inactivates yeast, weakens gluten
Dough, cookie	3 months
Pasteurized eggs in cartons	1 year, purchased frozen, unopened, never thawed
Fish, breaded	4-6 months
Ice Pops	6 months
Fruit, frozen	4 months
Ice Cream	2-4 months
Juice concentrate	2 years
Soy meat substitutes	12-18 months
Vegetables	8 months
Waffles, pancakes	2 months
Whipped topping, non-dairy tub	6 months

Meat, Poultry, Wild Game & Fish

Meat, poultry and fish distributed through The Idaho Foodbank and partner agencies should be completely frozen, and stored at 0°F or below. Once such products are thawed, they should be prepared and eaten directly.

Meats, Fresh	Refrigerated (40°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Fatty fish (salmon, mackerel, perch, bluefish)	2 days	3-6 months
Lean fish (cod, flounder, sole, haddock, pollock)	2 days	12 months
Shrimp, raw	2 days	9 months
Crab, canned	6 months unopened; 5-7 days opened	Do not freeze
Crab, legs	3-5 days	9-12 months
Oysters, shucked	1-2 days	3-4 months
Lobster Tails, raw	4-5 days	6-9 months
Scallops, raw	1-2 days	3-6 months
Fish/Seafood, Cooked		
Fatty fish (salmon, mackerel, perch, bluefish)	5-7 days	3-6 months
Lean fish (cod, flounder, sole, haddock, pollock)	5-7 days	3-6 months
Shrimp and other Shellfish	5-7 days	3-6 months
Meats, Raw		
Beef Roasts	3-5 days	1 year
Beef Steaks	3-5 days	1 year
Pork Roasts	3-5 days	1 year
Pork Chops	3-5 days	1 year
Lamb Roasts	3-5 days	1 year
Lamb steaks/Chops	3-5 days	1 year
Poultry: Chicken or Turkey, whole	2 days	1 year
Ground Meats (beef, pork, lamb, or poultry)	2 days	9-12 months
Meats, Processed		
Bacon, unopened	2 weeks	6 months
Bacon, opened	1 week	2 months
Chicken, fried	4 days	4 months
Ham, unopened	2 weeks	1 year
Ham, opened	1 week	1-2 months
Hot Dogs, unopened	2 weeks	9 months
Luncheon Meats, deli sliced or opened	3-5 days	6 months
Luncheon Meats, unopened commercial package	2 weeks	1-2 months
Pepperoni, salami	1 month	6 months
Sausage, raw	2 days	6 months
Sausage, smokes links or patties	1 week	9 months
Wild Game		
Venison, Elk	3-5 days	3-4 months
Rabbit, Squirrel	1-2 days	6 months
Wild duck, pheasant, goose (whole)	1-2 days	6 months

Prepared Foods

Prepared Items/Deli Foods	Refrigerated (41°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Chicken, Roasted or Fried	3-4 days	4-6 months
Fruit, cut	Best By Date	Do not freeze
Guacamole	5-7 days	6 months
Hummus, Pasteurized	3 months	Do Not Freeze
Hummus, with Preservatives	2 months	Do Not Freeze
Hummus, traditional, no preservatives, not pasteurized)	7 days	Do Not Freeze
Main dishes, meals	3-4 days	2-3 months
Meats in gravy or broth (including meat pies)	1-2 days	6 months
Pasta, fresh	1 week	1 month
Salads, prepared (macaroni, egg, potato, chicken, tuna, etc.)	3-5 days	Do Not Freeze
Sauces, Egg-Based (Hollandaise, etc.)	10 days	Do Not Freeze
Side dishes, cooked vegetables	3-4 days	1-2 months
Side dishes, potato-based (not salad)	3-4 days	1-2 months
Side dishes, rice	3-4 days	1-2 months
Soups, Stews	2-3 days	4-6 months
Spinach, salad greens (bagged)	Date on bag	Do Not Freeze

Guidelines for the Storage of Fresh Produce

- Most fruits and vegetables have the best quality when kept refrigerated. There are, however some exceptions.
- All cut produce should be stored at 40°F or below. Too cold and it could cause damage.
- Bananas should not be refrigerated, which will cause banana skin to blacken – but the fruit will not ripen. Bananas create their own CO₂ and will ripen faster if kept in a sealed bag.
- Very fresh apples, mangoes and stone fruits can be stored at room temperature, but these items should be refrigerated as they ripen.
- Hardy vegetables such as onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes, winter squash and garlic can be stored in cool, dark places outside of the cooler. Potatoes should not be exposed to direct sunlight.
- When deciding how to store produce, use how the produce department in the grocery store is set up.

Sources

1. "Shelf Life of Food Bank Products." 2012. Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank
2. "Food Product Dating." December 2016. USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service.
3. "Bottled Water Storage". International Bottled Water Association www.bottledwater.org
4. "Food Storage"; No. EC446; Albrecht, Julie A.; University of Nebraska;
5. "Safe Home Food Storage"; Van Laanen, Peggy; Texas A&M Extension Service; B-5031; May 1999.
6. "The Food Keeper – A Consumer Guide to Food Quality & Safe Handling." Food Marketing Institute.
7. "Classification of Visible External Can Defects". AOAC International in Cooperation with the Food and Drug Administration.

Food Safety Resources

www.foodsafety.gov

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/food-safety/food-safety-resources>

<http://www.fightbac.org/free-resources/>

<https://www.statefoodsafety.com/Resources>

<https://www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/HealthCareProfessionals/default.htm>

<https://www.fmi.org/food-safety/food-safety-resources>