

FBA Fact Sheet for Code Dating of Food Products

Code Dating Terminology:

“Best if used by” – Manufacturers use this date to indicate the last date by which the highest quality of the particular product is guaranteed. After this date, the product is still safe to consume but may not be at its highest quality in terms of nutrition and taste. For example, a box of cold cereal with a “best if used by date 6/25/10” is still safe to eat for several months afterward. However, it may not taste as fresh and may be slightly stale.

“Sell By” – The date the manufacturer recommends the product to be sold with the assumption it will be stored in an individual’s home for several days after purchase. A “sell by” date is most commonly found on dairy items and other refrigerated foods.

“Expiration date” – This phrase is used with baby food and infant formula. After this date the nutritional quality of the food cannot be ensured. Because baby food and infant formula are the primary source of nutrition for infants, a food of lower nutritional quality is harmful to their growth and development. *Therefore all baby food and infant formula must be discarded on their expiration date.* It is illegal according to the Health Department to sell and distribute them after this date passes.

“Pack Date/Code Date” – Indicates the date the product was originally packaged but does not indicate the time by which the product should be consumed.

* Date labels are not a safety date.

Food Storage and Handling:

Due to the ambiguity regarding how long a product is safe to consume after its posted sell by, best if used by, and pack dates it is the responsibility of the consumer to properly store, handle, and examine the food product prior to consumption. The storage and handling practices greatly impact how long a product is safe to consume. Experts say the same product will last for different lengths of time depending on how it is stored. Therefore, to best ensure the quality of the food products your food program distributes please adhere to the following guidelines for food handling and storage:

- If a canned good has any bulges, dents near top or bottom rim, dents larger than half the diameter of a penny, rust spots, or are leaking they must be discarded. These indicate a high chance the quality of the food inside has been compromised.
- If a package is open, torn, or leaking it must be thrown away.
- Refrigerator temperatures should be between 32 and 40 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Freezer temperatures should be at 0 degrees Fahrenheit or below.
- Dry storage should be between 40 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit.
- All storage areas including dry, freezers, and refrigerators should have enough space to allow air to circulate.
- Store food as soon as possible in its appropriate location. The longer a frozen or refrigerated product is outside of the freezer or refrigerator the more quickly it will become unsafe to consume.

- When in doubt, throw it out.

How long after an expiration, sell by, or use by date is a product safe to consume?

- Frozen items can be kept indefinitely but the overall quality will begin to decrease.
- Refrigerated items are not suitable for consumption long after their sell by date but particular length of time varies with the product. Usually they are still safe for at least a week after the posted date.
- Dry and canned goods can be consumed between 9 and 36 months after these dates.
- Remember: The length of time a product is still safe to consume depends largely on if the product was stored at the correct temperature. Products past these dates should be examined through taste, smell, and sight. Any foul odors or discolorations indicate the product is not safe for consumption and should be discarded.

Baby Food & Infant Formula:

The only expiration dates the government requires are on infant formula and baby food. These products must be thrown out if not consumed by these dates. All other foods are up to the discretion of the consumer.

Remember: According to the Good Samaritan Act, it is your responsibility as a food program to examine food received prior to distributing these products to your clients.