



Food Safety: What Do Expiration Dates Really Mean

A little known fact; there is no federal regulation that requires food companies to put any type of expiration date on food (except infant formula). Some states have rules that require dates on certain items like milk. Many big companies put dates on everything so that they can ship products to those states without having to do anything special or different to the packaging.

It's important to note that the vast majority of expiration dates are related to food quality, not food safety. For example, a product may taste, smell, or feel fresher if it's eaten by the date on the package, but the date won't reflect whether the food might be contaminated with bacteria. Regardless of the date on the package itself, some items such as deli meat should be eaten or tossed within three days of purchase (for fresh-sliced) or three days of opening (for prepackaged) because the bacteria so commonly found on deli meat can continue growing to dangerous levels even under refrigeration as the days go on.

Here's what dates on packages actually mean. A "sell by" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. A "best if used by [or before]" date is recommended for best flavor or quality, but isn't related to safety. The "use by" date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality (as determined by the manufacturer of the product). As useful as those dates are, the way the product has been handled is at least as important. If it has been properly refrigerated, a food should be safe to eat even after any of those dates have passed.

There are other signs, besides the dates alone, that food has passed its prime. Foods can develop an off-odor, flavor, or appearance as the days go by and spoilage bacteria (different from the sickening kind) grow. If the food smells or tastes off, you should skip it for quality reasons even if you think it's probably safe. But-and this is key-if foods are mishandled, bacteria can grow and cause foodborne illness even before the date on the package expires. For example, hot dogs taken to a picnic and left out in the heat for several hours are not safe to eat, even if they are within the package's expiration date. Don't forget that you can always freeze food before the expiration date if you don't have time to prepare it and don't want to either risk it or waste it.

Remember to use or freeze homemade and restaurant leftovers containing meat, poultry, seafood, dairy, or eggs within four days.