

“Sell By” vs. “Use By” What’s the Difference?

Date codes on canned, boxed, and other packaged foods are confusing. These dates may NOT be related to food safety, but food quality.

There are no nationwide food dating rules for packaged and canned foods in the USA. Many states have their own standards, however. Putting a date on food is not required. These dates are used to indicate QUALITY, not safety.

Infant formula is the only food that is ruled by federal labeling policies.

DO NOT USE infant formula after the “Use by” date for safety reasons!

What do “Sell By” and “Use By” mean?

- “Sell by” tells the store how long to display the product. Buy this food item before this date.
- “Use by” is a quality date. The food manufacturer determines this date. Use the product before this date for best quality and flavor. The food is still safe to use after this date as long as the packaging is in one piece, unbroken and not damaged, punctured, ripped, or torn.
- “Best before” and “Best if used before/by” is a date related to quality and flavor. It is not related to safety. Use the food item before this date for freshest flavor and quality.

So, how long can you keep a food after buying it?

- Milk: Use within 1 week after the “Sell by” date.
- Eggs: Use eggs within 3-5 weeks after the “Sell by” date.
- Canned foods: Do not purchase or use canned or jarred foods that are bulging, rusted, leaking, moldy or dented. When in doubt, throw it out!
 - Acidic foods in cans (tomato products, fruits, etc.) are safe to use for up to 18 months after the date code.
 - Low acid foods in cans (vegetables, beans, peanut butter, canned meat) are probably safe to use for several years after the date code when stored properly. Store canned and dry foods in a dark, dry cabinet between 50° and 75° F. Avoid temperature extremes and use the “oldest” foods first.

Learn more here:

<http://extension.missouri.edu/n/2312>

<http://www.webmd.com/.../feat.../do-food-expiration-dates-matter>