

Is it Time to Toss?

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What do those dates on packages mean?

Americans throw away hundreds of dollars worth of food every year because they think it is not safe to eat. Open dating on packaging is decided by manufacturers and helps the store know how long to display the product. It helps the purchaser know the time limit to purchase or use the product for its best quality.

“Best If Used By” Date

This is the last date recommended for the use of the product while it is at peak quality. The date has been determined by the manufacturer of the product. If you eat the food after the “best if used by” date, it is still safe to eat, but it may not have the best quality.

“Sell By” Date

This is a calendar date on the packaging of a food product that tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires. The food is not unsafe if you eat it later, but it may not have the same quality as it did before the expiration date.

“Use By” Date

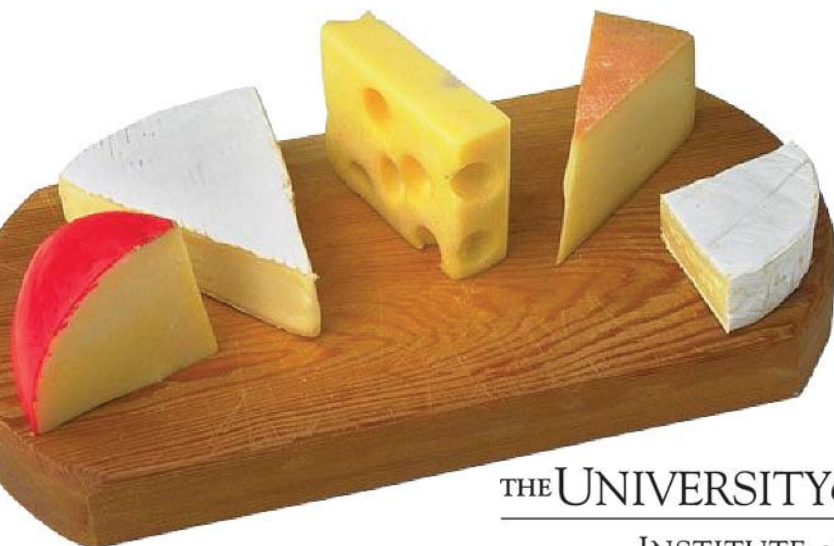
This is the last date recommended to use a product while it is at peak quality. This date is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a “sell by” or food safety date.

What does best quality mean?

Food quality is the characteristics of the food that make it acceptable to consumers. Several factors can affect the quality of a food. These factors might include appearance (size, shape, color), texture (how it feels in the mouth), and flavor. Quality may also refer to the nutrients in a food. Foods may lose some nutrients when they are stored for long periods. Best quality is when the food tastes and looks its best, and has retained many of the nutrients.

You Be the Judge

1. Which date is an indication that the food may no longer be safe to eat?
2. Who decides when a product’s “best if used by” date should be?
3. If you have eggs still in a carton and it says “sell by” with a date and that date has passed, are the eggs safe to eat?
4. If you purchase a package of cheese and the “best if used by” date is the next day, is the cheese safe to eat?



Egg Storage

The United States Department of Agriculture recommends always purchasing eggs before the “sell by” or “EXP” date on the carton. At home, store eggs in their original carton in the coldest part of the refrigerator, not in the door, where temperatures may fluctuate when it is opened and closed.

For best quality, use eggs within 3 to 5 weeks of the date you purchase them. The “sell-by” date will usually expire during that length of time, but the eggs are safe to use.



Leftovers, Soups & Stews

Cover leftovers, soups and stews in airtight packaging, or seal them in storage containers. This will help keep bacteria out, retain moisture, and prevent leftovers from picking up odors from other food in the refrigerator. Pour soups and stews into shallow containers to cool quickly. Refrigerate or freeze the wrapped leftovers for rapid cooling immediately or within 2 hours.

Leftovers, soups and stews can be stored in the refrigerator for 3 to 4 days.

Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

Whole fruits and vegetables do not need to be refrigerated for safety. However, once they have been peeled and cut they are exposed to bacteria that can make you sick. They are also more susceptible to spoilage than whole fruits and vegetables. Be sure any pre-cut fruit or vegetables you purchase have been chilled or placed on ice. Once you bring them home, all pre-cut fruits and vegetables must be stored in the refrigerator within 2 hours of purchase. This includes pre-bagged salads and lettuce.

Follow the dates on pre-bagged salads and lettuce and buy the freshest packages you can find. Store them in your refrigerator at 40° F or below and use them within a few days. Let your eyes be your guide. As lettuce begins to deteriorate, the color may darken, the leaves may wilt or may become moist, soft and slippery. When you notice these changes, it is best to throw it away.



How long does meat last in the refrigerator?

Keep meat in the refrigerator set to 40° F or below. Follow this chart to keep meat safe to eat.

Raw ground meat, all poultry and seafood	1 to 2 days
Raw roasts, steaks, and chops (beef, veal, lamb and pork)	3 to 5 days
Cooked meat, poultry and seafood	3 to 5 days
Hot dogs in opened packages	1 week
Hot dogs in unopened packages	2 weeks
Luncheon meat in opened package or deli sliced	3 to 5 days
Luncheon meat in unopened package	2 weeks
Bacon	7 days
Sausage, raw	1 to 2 days
Meat salads (egg, chicken, ham, tuna)	3 to 5 days



This is important!

Unlike foods stored at room temperature, meat can spoil quickly, even in the refrigerator.

Refrigeration slows the growth of microorganisms but does not stop their growth. Always follow the times listed in the table above—even when the dates on the packaging say otherwise. If a meat looks or smells spoiled, throw it away!

You Be the Judge

1. You left a tuna fish salad sandwich in the refrigerator 2 days ago. Is it safe to eat?
2. You find a package of bacon in the refrigerator from 2 weeks ago. Is it safe to eat?
3. You have an opened package of ham with a “use by” date 2 days ago. Is it safe to eat?
4. You forgot and left your soup on the stove for three hours. Is it safe to eat?
5. The “best if used by” date on your lettuce is a few days away, but the lettuce is wilted and looks soft and slippery. Is it safe to eat?

Are molds on food dangerous?

Some molds cause allergic reactions and some people develop respiratory problems when exposed to mold. A few molds, in certain conditions, will produce “mycotoxins,” poisonous substances that can make you sick.

Molds are microscopic fungi that live all around us. They produce spores that can be transported by air, water, or insects. These spores are responsible for the color you see. Molds have branches and roots that are like very thin threads. It is difficult to see the roots when mold is growing on food and these roots may be very deep in the food. You may see only those on the surface of the food.

How should you handle food with mold?

This depends on the food. Foods with high moisture content, such as luncheon meats and soft cheeses, can be contaminated with mold below the surface. Porous foods such as bread and baked goods can be contaminated below the surface. Never sniff the moldy food.

These are foods that should be thrown away if they have mold:

- Luncheon meats, bacon, or hot dogs
- Cooked leftover meat and poultry
- Cooked casseroles
- Cooked grain and pasta
- Soft cheese (such as cottage cheese, cream cheese, crumbled, shredded and sliced cheeses)
- Yogurt and sour cream
- Jams and jellies
- Soft fruits and vegetables (such as cucumbers, peaches, tomatoes, etc.)
- Bread and baked goods
- Peanut butter, legumes and nuts

These are foods that can be used if they have mold:

- Hard salami and dry-cured country hams (scrub mold off surface first)
- Hard cheese (such as cheddar and Swiss, cut off at least 1 inch around and below the mold spot)
- Firm fruits and vegetables (such as bell peppers and carrots, cut off at least 1 inch around and below the mold spot)

