

The Daily Union

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Title: Healthy & Safe Food Donation

I recently received a phone call asking about what the different dates on food packaging really mean. Some food packages have "Best If Used By:" while others have "Use By". The question specifically was "Do these mean two different things and, if so, what meanings do they have." Before I address that question, let me give you information about the rules and regulations of food product date labeling.

There are two types of product dating that may be shown on a product label, according to the United States Department of Agriculture's Food Safety & Inspection Service.

"Open Dating" refers to a label's calendar date applied to a food product by the manufacturer (the company that processed the food) or retailer (the store or chain of stores that sell the product to consumers like you and I.) This calendar date provides consumers with information on the estimated period of time for which the product will be of best quality and to help the store determine how long to keep the food on the shelf or display for sale.

"Closed Dating" is a code that consists of a series of letters and/or numbers applied by manufacturers to identify the date and time of production. When I worked in food manufacturing, we referred to this identification series as a "coded date." The coded date on the packaging we placed the food in indicated the plant number, the date and shift the product was manufactured on, and the employee number of the person responsible for packing the food. Other food manufacturing companies use a similar approach. This allows the company, in the event of a recall, to identify the specific date, time, and employee(s) connected to the packages being recalled. It also assists in the distribution process of the food item – making sure the food is shipped in the appropriate order.

It may surprise you to know that, except for infant formula, product dating is NOT required by Federal regulation. A few food products, such as poultry or thermally processed, commercially sterile product, must contain a "pack date" based on USDA regulations. However, there is some guidance recommended for some perishable foods by the Food Safety and Inspection Service as noted on the USDA website:

*"For meat, poultry, and egg products under the jurisdiction of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), dates may be voluntarily applied provided they are labeled in a manner that is truthful and not misleading and in compliance with FSIS regulations. To comply, a calendar date must express both the month and day of the month. In the case of shelf-stable and frozen products, the year must also be displayed. Additionally, immediately adjacent to the date, must be a phrase explaining the meaning of that date such as "Best if Used By.""*

<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-product-dating>

As mentioned above, "Closed Dating" has many uses and benefits to the food manufacturer but consumers benefit from the practice, as well. It is used on shelf-stable products such as cans and boxes of food to let consumers know how long the product has been moving through the system for purchase. "Open Dating" can help store employees with stock rotation and shelf stocking practices. It also helps consumers at the point of sale as they make their selections for the freshest foods.

There are no uniform or universally accepted descriptions used on food labels for open dating in the United States. As a result, there are a wide variety of phrases used on labels to describe quality dates.

Here are a few of the commonly used phrases, including the two I received a phone call about:

A "Sell-By" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires.

A "Best if Used By (or Before)" date is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

A "Use-By" date is 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.

What about the amount of time you store the food at home? If your food item is held past the open date label, is it still safe to use? The short answer is Yes! Even if the date expires during home storage, a product should be safe, wholesome and of good quality -- if handled properly and kept at 40° F or below.

However, there are other factors to consider. Foods can develop an off odor, flavor or appearance due to spoilage bacteria. If a food has developed such characteristics, you should not use it for quality reasons.

If foods are mishandled, however, foodborne bacteria can grow and cause foodborne illness -- before or after the date on the package. For example, if a container of potato salad is mistakenly left out on the table for several hours after the meal has ended, it wouldn't be safe if used thereafter, even if the date hasn't expired. Another consideration is how the person who served it handled the food. Did they take a tablespoon and whisk a few scoops out to taste before putting it on the table? This behavior, which we call "double dipping" in my house, spreads germs from the used spoon back to the container with the follow-up scoops.

As we get closer to the holiday season, you will find more opportunities to donate to local food pantries or food drives. This raises the question: "Can food be donated after the date passes?" Join me next week to find out this answer and more. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!