

"Sell-by," "best-by," "use-by:"

What do food date labels really mean?

With one exception, it's not about food safety.

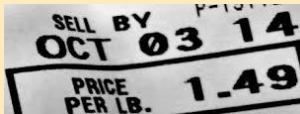
The dates on food labels can be confusing and are commonly misinterpreted, leading consumers to discard products with weeks of good shelf life remaining. And all that adds up to significant amounts of wasted money and resources, with serious impacts to the environment.

With the exception of infant formula, requiring expiration, "use by" or "best before" product dating is at the discretion of the manufacturer. Food and Drug Administration laws only require manufacturers to produce food that is wholesome and fit for consumption.



Here's a short summary of what food product dates mean:

Sell-By date



Tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires. But you can still store it at home for some time beyond that date, as long as you follow safe storage procedures (see links below for shelf life information).

Best if Used By (or Before) date

Date is recommended for best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

Use-By date



The last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. "Use-by" dates usually refer to best quality and are not safety dates. Even if the date expires during home storage, a product should be safe, wholesome and of good quality if handled properly.

Closed or coded dates

Packing numbers for use by the manufacturer.

Wondering about the shelf life of a particular food or drink?

Check out StillTasty.com or EatByDate.com, and search by item.

For more information on product dating:

- www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/Transparency/Basics/ucm210073.htm
- www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-safety-education

macgrove.org/foodwaste

