

Looking Beyond the Sell-By Date

We tend to throw out massive quantities of food because it spoils before we can eat it. Or, more accurately, because we worry that it has spoiled. Often, though, food is perfectly safe to eat after the sell-by date, but many won't want to take the risk of getting people sick. This is especially true in the school environment.

However, we need to understand what these dates are and what they mean to us as food service employees.

Packaging Dates - Food products are frequently labeled with some type of code/date. These can include "Sell by," "Best By," "Best Before," "Use Or Freeze By" and are often created by the manufacturer to show freshness or quality. They may also be applied by food stores for product display purposes. **They do not represent a date when the food goes bad. Food is not required by any Federal, State or local regulation to show any expiration dates.**

The following codes are often seen on products:

Sell by - Helps the store determine how long to **display** the product for sale for its best presentation and peak quality. It is not a safety date.

Best if used by / Best By / Best Before (or Freeze by) - This is the recommended date for best **flavor or quality**. It is NOT a purchase or safety date.

Use By – This is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at its **peak quality**. This date has been determined by the manufacturer and does not relate to the safety of the item.

The above dates and phrases are created by the manufacture. They do not pertain to food safety! Below is the MAIN date to consider:

EXPIRATION DATE - This is the date the product needs to be used on or before from a **safety** standpoint. Often found on some processed meat products. Once a processed meat product (ham, hot dog, lunchmeat, etc.) package is open, the product should be good for up to seven days if properly refrigerated. For example, if a package of hot dogs is opened and not all are prepared, the rest of the hot dogs need to be promptly eaten or frozen.

ADDITIONALLY, as raw food approaches any of these dates it should be frozen. This will increase the ability of the food to be served. Frozen food, if properly wrapped and defrosted will be safe.

FOR INFORMATION ONLY

The [FoodKeeper App](#), a collaboration between the U.S.D.A.'s Food Safety and Inspection Service and Cornell University, provides guidelines online about whether an ingredient has spoiled and how long it can be kept in a pantry, refrigerator or freezer. So far, the database contains over 400 different food and beverage items.