

Know the Facts About: Food "Expiration" Dates and Food Safety



Did You Know "Expired" Food Does Not Mean Unsafe Food?

Food product labels carry with them various code dates that are intended to convey product **freshness** or **quality** components. Contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of "expired" foods do not represent a safety hazard! Except for infant formula, baby food or specially produced refrigerated *Reduced Oxygen Packaging* (ROP) products, code dates represented with "Sell By", "Use By" or "Best If Used By" labels have no impact on food safety. Infant formula and baby food code dates are strictly enforced under Section 114094.5 of the California Retail Food Code ("Cal Code"). Infant formulas and baby foods are required to contain a specific quantity of certain nutrients as indicated on the label. Once baby foods have been stored for a certain amount of time, the nutritional value decreases and the infant formulas can clump together, blocking the baby bottle nipple. Refrigerated ROP products must be consumed prior to their "Use By" or "Sell By" date under Section 114057.1.



Federal, State and local food safety regulators do not require food firms to place "expired by", "use by" or "best before" dates on food products except as noted above. This information is entirely at the discretion of the manufacturer. It is important to note that a "best by", "use by" or expiration date does not relieve a firm from its regular food safety handling obligation.

A product that is dangerous to consumers would be subject to potential action by regulators to remove it from commerce regardless of any date printed on a label. Most people think the various dates refer to when a food will “go bad” or is “spoiled,” but the dates are simply an indication of quality and not food safety.



When in Doubt, Should it be Thrown Out?



Here are some things you can do if you're not sure if a product should be discarded or not:

- It's always a good option to contact the manufacturer with questions about a specific product. The manufacturers establish the particular food product's code date and will have the best information on the item they produced.
- Canned foods are safe indefinitely except when they are exposed to freezing temperature or temperatures above 90° (32.2°C). A general rule is if the cans are not rusted, dented or swollen, they are safe for consumption; however, the following canned items are best used by the dates outlined below:
 - Canned tomatoes – use within 12-18 months of purchase
 - Canned fruit – use within 12-18 months of purchase
 - Canned vegetables – use within 2-5 years of purchase
 - Canned meat – use within 2-5 years of purchase



Here Is a “Win-Win” Suggestion

Donate the product instead of sending it to the landfill. Again, as long as the packaging or container the food product comes in is intact and not compromised, food safety is not an issue with “expired” food products. Health codes allow for food donations without the fear of liability. Contact us to find out how!

For more information regarding date codes and food safety, contact
Orange County Environmental Health
by visiting www.ocfoodinfo.com or by calling 714-433-6000

