

Dates on Food Packages: What Do They Mean?

Date labels are required on food packaging. But what do they mean? Is it safe for your program to use or distribute food after the package date? The answer is, it depends. Use the information below to help determine which outdated foods to distribute and which to discard.

Expiration Date:

- Example “Expires 2/15/01” or “Do not use after 7/9/00”
- Do not use or give out infant formulas, vitamins, and drugs after the expiration date. They may lose their effectiveness. Yeast and baking powder may not work.

Pack Date:

- Examples “192 VIG 2109”
- Typically found on all USDA food and most canned items
- It is the date the food was packed on/manufactured. It may be in code. Usually this food is of good quality for 12-24 months. It will be safe for a very long time.

Pull Dates:

- Example “Sell by May 16”
- Look for this on refrigerated food such as milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, cream, eggs, lunch meat, and packaged salads.
- This means the store must take it off the shelf by the date listed. If the food has been kept refrigerated at the proper temperature, it will be safe to eat.
- Do not use if the seal has been broken or it smells bad.

Quality Date:

- Example “Best By 5/10/01” or “Use by 7/2/00”
- Look for this on packaged mixes, cold cereals, peanut butter, and other dry goods.
- It means that after the quality date the food will lose its good flavor and develop off-flavors. This date is an estimate for how long it will be in top quality. Most food will be good for a period of time from this date.
- **Do not use or distribute baby food that is past this date.**