

Dates on Food Packages: What Do They Mean?*

Date labels are common on many types of food packages. 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 Use the information below to help you decide which outdated foods to distribute and which to discard.

Expiration Dates

- Examples: "Expires 2/15/98" or "Do not use after 7/9/97"
- Look for it on infant formula, vitamins, yeast, baking powder, and cake mixes.
- Do not use or give out infant formulas, vitamins, or drugs after the expiration date. They may lose their effectiveness. Yeast and baking powder may not work.

Pack Dates

- Examples: "packed on 9/23/98" or "192 VIG 2109"
- This is the type of code used on almost all food packages. Look for it on canned fruits and vegetables, canned meat and fish, boxes of crackers and cookies, and spices.
- It is the date the food was packaged. It may be in code. Usually this food is of good quality for 12-18 months. It will be safe for a very long time.

Pull Dates

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

Quality Dates

- Examples: "Better if used by date"
- Look for this on packaged mixes, cold cereals, peanut butter, and baby food.
- It means that after the quality date the food will lose its good flavor and develop off-flavors. This date is the estimate for how long it will be in top quality. Do not use or distribute baby food that is past the quality date.

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