GETTING THE MOST OUT OF FOOD

A Guide to Food Date Labels for Food Shelf Staff

Food shelves provide an essential service to community members who live with food insecurity. Just like other food outlets, food shelves want to provide quality, appealing food to customers.

When sorting food donations or assisting shoppers, the dates on food labels can be confusing. People often think the "best by," "use by," and "sell by" date information on food labels relates to food safety. They usually do not. Sadly, this confusion results in about 7% of all food waste in the U.S.[1] Researchers estimate that simply redistributing the edible food that is discarded in the U.S. (a staggering 40% of all food in the U.S.) could eliminate hunger in this country.[2] Wasted food also has environmental costs. Food waste is the single largest part of garbage in the U.S., making up 24% of solid waste in municipal landfills and 22% of incinerated municipal solid waste.[3] This handout was created in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Health's Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP)

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Community-driven solutions to expand opportunities for active living, healthy eating, & commercial tobacco-free living.

explains what the dates on food labels mean and offers ideas for how food shelves can reduce wasted food and food waste.

Most date labels on foods indicate freshness or "peak" quality. Minnesota law calls these types of labels "quality assurance" dates or "open" dates, and requires them on most packaged foods.[4] Stores typically use these dates to track and move inventory.[5] Minnesota law explains that just because the food is past the quality assurance date, that doesn't mean it's not safe or wholesome, or that the food has to be removed or thrown away.[6] Food companies use different ways to decide the shelf life of their products, including using professional food tasters, conducting laboratory tests, or surveying consumers.[7] The point is — it's not an exact science.

The "use by" date *does* matter for baby formula, which is federally regulated.[8] Baby formula that has an expired date should not be used. The USDA recommends the same for baby food.[9] Also, for cake mixes, baking powder, baking soda, and similar baking ingredients, if they are more than 12 to 18 months past the "use by" or "best by" date, the baked item may not rise or come out as well, or it may be ok. Either way, it is likely to be safe to eat.

Minnesota also has a food safety law that requires restaurants, grocery stores and similar sellers of prepared foods to include a "use by" (or "discard by") date on some foods, called "time/temperature controls for safety" or TCS food.[10] TCS food is food that is prepared or opened on-site (at the restaurant, grocery store, etc.), held for at least 24 hours, and which must be maintained within certain temperature ranges and/or for limited time periods to remain safe to eat.[11] This includes items that contain meat, cooked pasta, rice, and potatoes,

among other types of food.[12] State law requires that these foods be either used or discarded within 7 days of the day the food was made.[13]

Whether food is still safe to eat can usually be determined by how it looks or smells. When food is spoiled by bacteria, it will take on an uncharacteristic odor or color, become slimy, or look moldy.[14] Cans with dents or bulges could also indicate a problem with the canning process, or that the food has gone bad. If you see any donated food with these characteristics, or in damaged packaging, it should not be provided to food shelf shoppers no matter what date is on the package. But it still can be disposed of in climate-friendly ways (see **Ideas for Diverting Inedible Donated Food from the Landfill**).

Contaminated Food Does Not Always Look or Smell Bad

When food is spoiled by some common forms of bacteria or pathogens, it usually looks or smells funny.[15] If food has any of these signs, do not eat it. Some bacteria, however, such as *listeria monocytogenes*, can thrive even in frozen foods, and do not affect how a food smells, feels, or tastes. This bacteria can show up in unpasteurized dairy products or juices, fresh produce that is not washed well, some meat products such as deli meat spreads, and when some foods, especially hot dogs, meat and egg dishes, are not cooked or stored properly.[16] This bacteria can make people sick even within any "use by" or "best by" date that may be on the food.

Here's what the most common food date labels mean:

"Best if Used By"

This label provides an estimate of the date until which food will be at its highest quality or freshness, as determined by food companies.[17] This is not a food safety date.

"Sell By"

Retailers use this label to manage their stock to ensure food is sold with enough time for consumers to eat it while it is still fresh.[18] This is not a food safety date.

"Use By"/"Enjoy By"/"Freeze By"

This label indicates the last date the product is expected to meet consumer expectations, as determined by food companies. **It relates to health and food safety when used on baby formula and TCS food and should be followed for those products.** But for other types of food, this is generally not a food safety date.[19]

Ideas for Diverting Inedible Donated Food from the Landfill

Food shelves can play a crucial role in reducing unnecessary food waste. Here are two suggestions:

- **Support client choice:** Allow clients to pick what they want, so that shoppers can take only what they need.[20] Place packaged foods beyond their "best by" date on a bonus shelf for clients to take as they please. Supporting client choice promotes equity and can lead to reduced food waste in shoppers' homes.
- **Share food storage tips:** Many food shelf users are already skilled in the kitchen when it comes to cooking food, but food shelves can share reminders about how to keep fresh food from going bad. For example, when greens and certain produce start to wilt but are not yet spoiled, home cooks can soak wilted produce in cold water to revive them. Food shelves can also provide tips on how to freeze fresh fruits and vegetables.[21]

When Food Spoils Before Shoppers Can Take It Home

When donated food goes bad before shoppers can take it home, it can still be used. Here are a few ways food shelves can divert spoiled food from landfills:

- **Donate to feed livestock:** Organizations can team up with local farms to give spoiled food to farmers to feed their livestock.[22] In rural areas, food shelves might be able to work directly with smaller local farms and donate to them. Organizations can also apply for a permit to send their spoiled food to feed pigs through the Minnesota Board of Animal Health.[23]
- **Compost on-site:** When food waste is diverted to compost, it produces less greenhouse gas emissions than if it was sent to a landfill.[24] If a food shelf has available space, it could consider adding a compost bin to for leftover spoiled produce. Staff can put spoiled produce and yard waste in a small compost bin outside, but should avoid placing meat or dairy foods into the bin.[25] Over time, the food scraps will transform into fertile soil that is perfect for gardening (and growing food!) and could be used by shoppers and staff alike.[26]
- **Recycle organics (where available):** Several cities and counties throughout Minnesota have commercial compost programs (also known as organics recycling).[27] The waste management company will pick up spoiled food from the food shelf and deliver it to a commercial compost facility where it is turned into nutrient-rich compost that is used to improve soil and protect water from excessive fertilizer use. Commercial compost sites can accept nearly all types of food waste including meat, dairy, bones, bread, produce, and compostable paper products.[28]

Throwing away good food is not just a waste of food, it's also a wasted opportunity to address food insecurity, save resources, and reduce greenhouse gases. Knowing what food date labels do and do not mean can help everyone do better at reducing wasted food and support healthier people and a cleaner environment.

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PHLC provides educational information and technical assistance on issues related to chronic disease prevention policy and health equity. PHLC does not lobby, nor does it provide legal representation or advice. This information is for educational purposes only.

Endnotes

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