

Do You Have a Science Experiment in Your Refrigerator?

Some foods are labeled with a "sell by" or "use by" or "best if used before...." label. Each means something different. The "sell by" date is the last day on which a store can (in good faith) display a product for sale.

Consumers should buy these foods before the expiration of this date. These foods should be safe and of good quality even after the expiration date if the product is unopened, handled properly, and kept below 40 degrees Fahrenheit. (See the table for shelf life.)

The "best if used by" date means that the best flavor, texture, and quality of the product is maintained if consumed by the date. It does not mean that unopened food will go bad after the date, rather that the taste may be a little "off."

"Closed or coded dates" are found on cans and boxes of food, products which are considered shelf stable products. These dates are for the stores to rotate their stock. Consumers should not confuse this with "use by" date.

Believe it or not, the FDA does not require product dating to be on the package. As a general rule of thumb, canned foods that are acidic, such as tomatoes, pineapple, and grapefruit have a shelf life of 12 to 18 months. Low acid canned foods, such as meat, poultry, fish and most vegetables have a longer shelf life of two to five years if cans are kept in good condition and stored in a cool, dry place.

Shelf Life of Common Foods		
Food Item	Refrigerator	Freezer
Fresh meat		
Steak, beef	3-5 days	6-12 months
Chop, pork	3-5 days	4-6 months
Roast, beef	3-5 days	6-12 months
Roast, pork & veal	3-5 days	4-6 months
Ground & stew meats		
Hamburger & stew meat	1-2 days	3-4 months
Ground turkey, veal, pork	1-2 days	3-4 months
Meat leftovers		
Cooked meat & meat dishes	3-4 days	2-3 months
Gravy & meat broth	1-2 days	2-3 months
Fresh poultry		
Chicken	3-4 days	4 months

Cooked poultry dishes	3-4 days	4-6 months
Pieces, plain	3-4 days	4 months
Pieces covered with broth or gravy	1-2 days	6 months
Chicken nuggets, patties	1-2 days	1-3 months
Fresh fish		
Lean (i.e., cod)	1-2 days	3-6 months
Fatty (i.e., blue, perch, salmon)	1-2 days	2-3 months
Dairy products		
Milk	5 days past carton date	1 month
Swiss, brick, processed cheese	3-4 weeks	
Hard cheese	6 weeks	
Processed cheese	4 months	
Margarine	4-6 months	1 year
Butter	1-2 weeks	6-9 months
Eggs		
Fresh in shell	3-5 weeks	don't freeze
Raw yolks, whites	2-4 days	1 year
Whole egg, beaten	6 months	
Hard boiled	1 week	don't freeze

Food handling is also very important to ensure safe consumption. Do not defrost foods at room temperature for more than two hours because food-borne bacteria can grow and cause illness. Meats and poultry (which may already contain bacteria) should be defrosted in the refrigerator. Sanitary practices such as hand washing with warm soapy water and using clean utensils during food preparation is essential.

The rule of thumb is that if a food develops an off odor, flavor or appearance, it has likely spoiled, and you should not consume it.

Some general tips to reduce the possibility of poor quality/spoiled food:

- Purchase the product before the date expires.
- Follow handling recommendations on the product label.
- If perishable, take the food home immediately after purchase and refrigerate it promptly.
- When perishable food is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires since food that is continuously frozen is safe for many months.