



Ontario Home Economics Association

Ask a Professional Home Economist

For Immediate Release

It's a Date - Best Before or Expiry?

by Ellie Topp, P.H.Ec.

With stories in the news about Listeria and other causes of foodborne illness, consumers are beginning to pay more attention to issues of food safety. Many packaged foods are stamped with dates that are prefaced by the words 'best before', 'packaged on', 'sell by', and even 'best if used before'. A look at the intended meaning of these dates may be helpful to alleviate confusion. First of all, there is a difference between dates indicating when the food is safe to eat and a date indicating when the food is of optimum quality.

In Canada, manufacturers and retailers must determine the 'durable life' of the foods they are producing. Durable life of a food is defined by the *Canadian Food and Drug Regulations* as the amount of time, starting on the day a food is packaged, that the unopened food will retain "its normal wholesomeness, palatability and nutritional value, when stored under appropriate conditions". The Regulations go on to stipulate that any pre-packaged food with a durable life of 90 days or less must have a durable life date stamped onto the packaging, known on food labels as the 'best before' date.

For foods that are susceptible to spoilage, generally most dairy and meat products, the 'best before' dates should be followed closely. These foods need to be used before the date on their package expires, and as a general rule should not be consumed if this 'best before' date is passed. Closely related are the 'packaged on' dates required for foods packaged in the retail store. This label must also include a date indicating the durable life of the food, unless this appears on a poster next to the food. Most fresh meat and store-wrapped deli meat and cheese carry 'packaged on' dates, whereas fresh fruits and vegetables are exempt from this labelling. The operative word in the definition of durable life is 'unopened'. After the seal on a food package is broken, it is susceptible to micro-organisms finding their way into the product that can cause spoilage. For example, if a carton of cream has been opened, it may in fact begin to spoil well before the 'best before' date provided. Remember that once a product is opened, it should be used quickly.

For foods with longer shelf lives such as breads, baked goods and even eggs, the 'best before' dates are more an indication of the quality than of food safety.

If the durable life of a food is greater than 90 days, manufacturers are not required to put 'best before' dates on their products, although many do so. Dates stamped on these products are determined by the manufacturer to indicate when the product is the most flavourful and nutritious. Such foods can usually be safely consumed well after their 'best before' dates

although they may have lost some of their original flavour and nutritional value. Therefore, that past-dated package of cookies hiding in the back of the cupboard is perfectly safe to eat, even if not very tasty. Keep in mind that it is perfectly legal to sell products after their 'best before' dates. The wise consumer will always check the dates on foods to be purchased.

Drugs and natural health products carry yet a different kind of date, called an 'expiry date', which indicates the shelf life and stability, and therefore effectiveness, of the product. However, 'expiry date' is not a term used for food in Canada. Even so, it has become a common understanding to think that the 'best before', 'sell by' and 'best if used by' dates stamped on food packages are, in fact, expiration dates rather than indicators of safety or quality. Infant formula, which does carry an expiration date, is the only exception to this regulation.

When checking your refrigerator or cupboard, use your common sense and especially your sense of sight and smell. Keep in mind that even if a food shows no signs of spoilage, it may be harbouring micro-organisms that can cause foodborne illness.

Before consuming any perishable product, consumers are advised to carefully check the 'best before' date, especially for deli-type meats and dairy. And follow the rule: "When in doubt, throw it out".

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Ellie Topp is an Ottawa-based professional home economist and a certified culinary professional. She is co-author of several cookbooks including *The Complete Book of Small-Batch Preserving* and *Savoury Wisdom: Delicious, Healthy Recipes for Two*.

The Ontario Home Economics Association, a self-regulated body of Professional Home Economists, promotes high professional standards among its members so that they may assist families and individuals to achieve and maintain a desirable quality of life.

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