

## Food - 'use-by' and 'best before' dates

All packaged foods with a shelf life of less than two years must have a use-by or 'best before' date stamped on the box, wrapper or bottle. This date gives you an idea of how long the food will last before it loses quality. A product will remain fresh and of good quality right up to the 'best before' date (and sometimes beyond) if it is properly stored, both at home and at the supermarket.

Foods with a shelf life of less than two years must have a 'best before' date. It may still be safe to eat those foods after the 'best before' date, but they may have lost quality and some nutritional value. Foods that should not be consumed after a certain date for health and safety reasons, such as a ready-to-eat chilled lasagne, must have a 'use-by' date. An exception is bread, which can be labelled with a 'baked on' or 'baked for' date if its shelf life is less than seven days.

### Manufacturers err on the side of caution

Manufacturers usually choose a 'best before' date well before the time when the food would be expected to deteriorate and spoil. A conservative 'best before' date is designed to encourage you to eat the product while it is fresh and at its best, so you should consider 'best before' dates as a guide only. Frozen and canned products, in particular, tend to keep their quality for some time after the 'best before' date has expired. Within reason, provided the food looks and smells as you would expect, it should be safe to eat, even if the 'best before' date has passed.

### Foods need proper storage

Whether or not a product keeps fresh and edible right up to the use-by or 'best before' date depends on how it is stored. Many foods need to be kept at certain temperatures, either in the fridge or freezer. For instance, fresh milk needs to be refrigerated. If a carton of milk is left out on the kitchen bench, it will quickly sour, regardless of its 'best before' date.

### Check the packaging

Foods can become spoiled well before their use-by or 'best before' date, either because their packaging has been damaged or they weren't stored properly at the supermarket. When buying foods, check for dents, leaks and tears in the packaging. If you can see any sign of damage, don't buy the product, as it might be contaminated with bacteria. Many products, such as dairy foods, need to be kept at a low temperature to avoid spoilage. Don't buy any foods that need to be chilled or frozen if they are sitting on unrefrigerated shelves, or stacked in overfilled fridges.

### Collect cold and frozen foods last

When shopping, collect your cold and frozen foods last of all. These foods could spoil before their 'best before' date if they are allowed to get warm. It is often best to keep them in a cooler bag while travelling home. As soon as you arrive home with your groceries, put away your cold and frozen foods first.

### Where to get help

- Food Standards Australia New Zealand contact us or tel. (02) 6271 2222
- Australian Consumers' Association Tel. (02) 9577 3333
- Food Safety Information Council Tel. 0407 626 688

### Things to remember

- 'Best before' dates give you an idea of how long foods will last before they lose quality.

- Most products will last beyond their 'best before' date if they are stored properly.

Foods marked with a use-by date must be consumed before that date.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Food Standards Australia New Zealand

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