
Food – use-by and best-before dates

Summary

- Check the 'use-by' or 'best before' date when you buy food.
 - '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 or on that date.
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Most packaged foods with a shelf life of less than two years must have a 'best before' or 'use-by' date stamped on the box, wrapper or bottle. The best-before 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 the store and at your home.

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 must have a 'use-by' date. Bread is an exception – it can be labelled with a 'baked on' or 'baked for' date if its shelf life is less than seven days.

Reliability of use-by and best-before dates

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.

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. Keep an eye on the 'use-by' or 'best before' dates on the food in your cupboards. Don't eat any food that is past its 'use-by' date, even if it looks and smells okay.

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 transported or stored properly before sale. When you buy food, 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 Tel. (02) 6271 2222

- Australian Consumers' Association Tel. (02) 9577 3333
- Food Safety Information Council Tel. 0407 626 688

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