

What Food Expiration Dates Mean for Food Safety

The reality is that you can eat food past the food expiration date and it might still taste good — or it might not. For example, milk may sour around the expiration date or a few days afterwards, depending on how cold your refrigerator is. The risk of food-borne illness also increases after that date, especially if your storage conditions are less than optimal.

Practicing good food safety habits at home will help food last safely up to, and beyond, the date on the label. One of the most important food safety parameters is temperature. For example, canned goods in a pantry that stays consistently cool all year round will last longer than canned goods stored in a location where temperatures fluctuate between hot and cool. Likewise, frozen foods stored in a freezer will last longer if the freezer is not opened often, which causes temperature changes. Humidity is also a concern — try to keep all storage areas dry, with low humidity.



Here are more food safety tips that will help your foods exceed expiration dates and ensure that you stay healthy:

- Refrigerate foods at 40° F immediately. Food safety experts recommend planning your day so that you can take groceries home to the refrigerator right away, instead of letting them sit in the car while you run other errands.
- Don't keep refrigerated foods out of the fridge for more than two hours.
- Keep ready-to-eat foods separate from those that are raw and need cooking.
- If a food product only has a "sell by" date or no food expiration date at all, cook or freeze the item as soon as possible.
- Make sure prep areas and storage areas in your kitchen are clean.

If you or someone in your household is immune-compromised, be sure to eat foods by the "use by" date. To do otherwise isn't worth the risk of food-borne illness.

Food safety may actually have more to do with the habits you have at home than with the dates on the packaging, but if you want safe foods at their best, use the printed expiration dates as your starting point.

Girl Scouts Gift Centre Hall Food Pantry



Paige Hockenberry (left) and Paige Holsinger (right) present a check to the Centre Hall Food Pantry for \$288. This money was raised from Girl Scout activities. Receiving the check are Erskine Cash and Bonnie Brown from the Centre Hall Food Pantry.

Penns Valley Family Services Center



The former Millheim Community Action Food Pantry (Outreach Center) relocated to 337 E. Aaron Square, Aaronsburg, PA 16820. For more information call 814-349-5850.



Serving Centre County residents with food needs.

Food Pantries of Centre County



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Food Safety

Part of being a smart shopper is checking the expiration date on food packages. But if you meticulously check food packaging for printed dates, you may be surprised to find out that with the exception of baby food and infant formula, food expiration dates are really only guidelines to help you buy food at optimal freshness.

POINTS OF INTEREST

Salvation Army Back-to-School Program

Centre County families with children in grades K-12 can call 861-1785 to see if they qualify for the Back-to-School Program.

The program provides clothing, a backpack and school supplies.

The event is scheduled for Saturday, August 17th at the Benner Pike Wal-Mart.

Must prequalify.

PA CareerLink Centre County is Moving to:

3081 Enterprise Dr.

State College, PA 16801

814-272-5465

Open—Monday through Friday 8:30am to 12pm

252 Match Factory Place

Bellefonte, PA 16823

Open—Monday, Tuesday, Thursday 1 to 4:30pm

- **"Sell by"** This date gives you tips on what's cheap as well as food safety information. "Sell by" labeling is more for the grocer than it is for the consumer. "Consumers are fine to purchase products by this date," says food safety expert Catherine Strohbehn, PhD, RD. "Generally stores will discount closer to this date so consumers looking for a bargain can purchase up to the sell date and then use as soon as possible." Use refrigerated products within the next day or so; frozen goods can be stored in your freezer for up to three months. Dairy and eggs usually have a sell-by date, but most milk should last for five to seven days past the sell-by date, soft cheese lasts up to two weeks longer and hard cheese can last as long as six months after the sell-by date.
- **"Use by"** "Use by" and "Best if used by" are intended to assure consistent food quality. This type of dating provides guidance to the consumer, but the guidelines are somewhat loose. Products can last longer than the "use by" date, depending on how the product is handled and stored. "Some canned goods will keep for years if there haven't been wide temperature fluctuations. Higher-acid products like canned pineapple have a shorter shelf life, but are still good for a year or longer." Infant formula and baby food are significant exceptions to this rule: It is best not to give your baby formula or food after the "use by" date. Most baked foods and snack foods have a use-by date. These types of foods typically contain preservatives so they are unlikely to spoil for months or even years.
- **"Freeze by"** Occasionally foods will be labeled "use or freeze by," which means that you can freeze them for a period of time after that date
- **"Expiration"** dates refer to the date after which the food is not recommended for consumption. Few foods actually have expiration dates printed on them. Canned goods often have expiration dates. Most expiration dates on canned goods extend to as long as five years.

Companies recommend shelf life dates but food can be good long after depending on storage conditions. Things to look for before use are:

- ⇒ Integrity of Container
- ⇒ Bulging Seals
- ⇒ Rusty Cans
- ⇒ Seam Leakage

