

What is Food Product Dating?

Open Dating shows a calendar date for quality, while **Closed Dating** uses a code for production date and time.



What Types of Food Are Dated?

Open dating appears on most foods, including meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy, while **closed dates** are found on shelf-stable products like cans and boxes.

Are Dates for Food Safety or Food Quality?

Manufacturers use dating to indicate food quality, not safety, and it's not required by law except for infant formula.



How Do Manufacturers Determine Quality Dates?

The quality of perishable products is influenced by factors such as the length of time and temperature during distribution and sale, as well as the product's characteristics and packaging.

For example, Sausages with preservatives or beef in modified atmosphere packaging stay fresh longer. While the quality may deteriorate after the labeled date, these products can still be safe if properly handled.

Consumers should check for signs of spoilage before consuming products past their best-quality date.



Are Foods Safe to Eat After the Date Passes?

Except for infant formula, products are generally safe after the labeled date if properly handled until spoilage is evident.

Spoiled foods may develop off odors, flavors, or textures due to spoilage bacteria. While spoilage bacteria don't cause illness, they affect food quality.

Pathogenic bacteria, on the other hand, can cause foodborne illness. Improper storage or handling can speed up spoilage, but changes in meat or poultry color alone aren't signs of spoilage.



What Date-Labeling Phrases are Used?

In the U.S., there are no standard descriptions for open dating on food labels, leading to a variety of phrases used to indicate quality dates.

- A "**Best if Used By/Before**" date indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- A "**Sell-By**" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale for inventory management. It is not a safety date.
- A "**Use-By**" date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date except for when used on infant formula as described below.
- A "**Freeze-By**" date indicates when a product should be frozen to maintain peak quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.



Food Safety Questions

- Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline toll-free at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)
- The Hotline is open year-round and can be reached from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Eastern Time) Monday through Friday.
- E-mail questions to MPHotline@usda.gov.
- Consumers with food safety questions can also "AskUSDA," the FSIS virtual representative. Available 24/7 at [AskU](#)



Where can I find information on the proper handling of food?

<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety>

