

# The Truth About Food "Shelf Life Dating"?

**"Best if Used By (or Before)" date:**  
recommended for best flavor or quality. Not a purchase or safety date.

**"Use-By" date:**  
for the consumer.

**"Sell-By" date**  
for the store.

by, Rebecca Morley, MA

It doesn't take a swig of sour milk, a whiff of spoiled cheese, or the sight of moldy bread to alert us to the importance of fresh food. News concerning food scares means nervous consumers peering closely at dates stamped on products they buy at the supermarket. Unfortunately, the entire dating system is about as clear as mud. Some products have a %sell by+date, others have a %best if used by+or %before+date, still others offer a %use by+date. Confused yet?

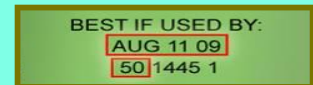


Such practices, though beneficial, can add to **consumer confusion**. Though it may seem that the government is not being assertive enough in regulation, the truth is expiration dates can be a very complicated business. Environmental storage conditions including exposure to varying temperatures, packaging and handling techniques all play a part in safety and quality of food.

Eat Smart is running a series on expiration dates to help you sort through the issues:

- **Beginning with definitions**
- **Leading through various food categories**
- **Ending with money saving recommendation guidelines**

Is it surprising to know that dating *is not required by US Federal Law*? The exceptions are infant formula and some baby foods which **must** be withdrawn by their expiration date. USDA, which regulates fresh produce and meats, only requires the labeling date when poultry is packed on the farm. Some states require further dating, others do not. However some manufacturers are allowed to add %use by+ or %sell by+dates. Grocers may choose to repackage meats, deli and seafood, adding their own package labels with dates.



**Knowing what labels really mean** helps avoid waste and preserves quality and safety of the food your family consumes. Most labels should be used a guide, not a hard and fast expiration date. Always validate the integrity of your senses and if food smells, looks, or tastes off, toss it regardless of label date.

Once the consumer takes food home, not even the government can find out exactly what happened, which is why it's unlikely you will have a definite safety label on perishable food.

[www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/content/oct2006/db20061002\\_959305.htm?campaign\\_id=rss\\_topStories](http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/content/oct2006/db20061002_959305.htm?campaign_id=rss_topStories)  
& [www.fsis.usda.gov/factsheets/Food Product Dating/index.asp](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/factsheets/Food_Product_Dating/index.asp)

