Best before and use-by dates

It is important to understanding ‘best before’ and ‘use-by’ dates on food labels and how you must treat them differently.

Food may contain bacteria and if stored for too long or at the wrong temperature, can cause food poisoning. So it’s important to understand the different types of dates and advice on food packaging.

Depending on the product, you will see one of the two dates on most packaged foods:

- a use-by date - relating to food safety
- a best before date - relating to food quality

Use-by dates are about safety

A use-by date on food is about safety. This is the most important date to remember. You can eat food until and on the use-by date but not after. You will see use-by dates on food that goes off quickly, such as meat products or ready-to-eat salads.

For the use-by date to be a valid guide, you must carefully follow storage instructions. For example, if the instructions on the packaging tell you to refrigerate after opening, you should keep the food in a fridge at 5°C or below. Find out more about chilling your food correctly.

After the use-by date, don’t eat, cook or freeze your food. The food could be unsafe to eat or drink, even if it has been stored correctly and looks and smells fine. A lot of foods, including meat and milk, can be frozen before the use-by date though so plan ahead.

Best before dates are about quality

The best before date, sometimes shown as BBE (best before end), is about quality and not safety. The food will be safe to eat after this date but may not be at its best. Its flavour and texture might not be as good. Best before dates appear on a wide range of foods including:

- frozen foods (such as peas, chips and ice cream)
- dried foods (such as pasta and rice)
- tinned foods (such as baked beans and canned tomatoes)

The best before date will only be accurate if the food is stored according to the instructions on the packaging.

There is more guidance on WRAP’s website for best before and use-by dates.

The sniff test

For foods with a best before date (which concerns food quality), you can use sensory cues to find out if the food is appropriate to eat. You could look for visible mould on bread, taste to see if biscuits/crisps are stale, or sniff/smell some dairy products with a best before date to see if they
have soured.

For food with a use by date, the ‘sniff test’ is not an appropriate method for testing if food is safe to eat. Food can look and smell fine even after the use by date has passed, but the product will not be safe to eat. We can’t see or smell the bugs that can cause food poisoning.

Manufacturers are responsible for deciding whether to apply a use by date or a best before date on their products. This will depend on factors such as how the food is made and how risky it is. They will make sure the right label is used on the product.

**Always check the date labels on food**

- Milk with a use by date should never be sniffed or used past the date
- Milk with a best before date label can be sniffed to see if it has gone bad and please remember to check the label instructions

If you have a problem with your sense of smell and cannot use it to detect if food with a best before date has gone off or stale, then ask someone else to check it for you. If that is not an option, then we advise that you stick to the best before date on the packet as this has been determined by the manufacturer to be the date which the food is at its best.

**Charity food banks**

If you are supplying people with packaged food from a food bank, you still need to check and follow the use-by dates.

Giving out food after its ‘use-by’ date puts people at risk, and could lead to enforcement action being taken against the food bank.

**Avoiding food waste**

**Plan your meals ahead**

Get into the habit of checking what you already have in the fridge and freezer before you go shopping. Look out for foods that are approaching their use-by date and other fresh foods that can go off over time and try to use them up first. This includes:

- fruit and vegetables
- meat and fish
- cheese, milk or other dairy products

**Freeze and defrost your food correctly**

Food properly frozen won’t deteriorate and bacteria cannot grow in it, so when frozen it can’t become more unsafe.

Once defrosted however, the pause button is off. Only defrost food as you need it and eat it within 24 hours. Find out more about freezing and defrosting food.

Once food has been defrosted, use it within 24 hours and cook it until steaming hot before serving.

Find out more about chilling, freezing and defrosting food.
Always check packet instructions to ensure that foods are suitable for freezing, especially for ready-to-eat foods.

Take a look at Love Food Hate Waste for more information, including recipe ideas for leftovers.