

The FSA reveals that 50% of adults do not always check the use-by date on their food putting themselves and family at risk

Findings show that 44% view use-by dates as a 'useful guide' – not realising the potential health risks of getting food poisoning, which could make them or their family seriously ill.

According to the poll, 50% of adults in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, cannot identify the correct definition for a use-by date: that is, that food can be eaten until the use-by date, but not safely after. This is in contrast to the best before date, which is about quality, and food eaten past this date might not taste as good.

The research also showed that 76% of these adults have knowingly eaten food past the use-by date, with 37% admitting to cooking food for other people that is past its use-by date - which rises to 43% people aged 25-34 years old.

The poll revealed 77% of people decide whether food is safe to eat by smelling it, which rises to 80% of women compared to 73% of men.

Professor Robin May, Chief Scientific Advisor at the FSA said:

"These findings are worrying. They indicate that people are often confused about food dates, potentially putting themselves and others at risk of illness. A use-by date on food is there for a reason. It is about safety. After the use-by date you cannot cook, freeze or eat the food safely, even if it smells or looks ok. It's really not possible to tell whether food is safe to eat by smelling or tasting it. We would like everyone to take the use-by dates on their food seriously."

Dr Dawn Harper, spokesperson for the campaign commented:

"It's so important to understand that best before and use-by dates are not the same. If you eat food past the use-by date it could make you or your family seriously ill. I've treated a number of patients for food poisoning over the years, and it can be particularly nasty to those more vulnerable to infection such as young children and elderly people. Make sure you're looking after yourself and always checking the use-by date to keep you and your family safe and healthy."

According to the poll, of those adults who sometimes eat food past the use-by date, 43% do so believing that if food is just past the use-by date, it's safe to eat. Over half (51%) continue to eat food past the use-by date because they've done it before and felt fine and 59% say they eat food past the use-by date because they don't want it to go to waste.

Professor Robin May continues:

“It’s great that people are trying to minimise food waste, but there are lots of ways to do that without gambling with your health, such as planning your meals ahead of time, checking what you have in the fridge that’s close to its use-by date and freezing food right up until the use-by date.”

Findings also show that 39% of 16-24 year olds reported they were more likely to pay attention to the use-by date during the lockdown in February 2021, compared to before the pandemic (March 2020). 55-75s are the group least likely to change their behaviour when it comes to checking use-by dates, with 90% reporting no change in behaviour.

You can find more advice on use-by dates on our [Best before and use-by dates](#) page.

About this poll

The Research poll completed by Ipsos Mori based on 2,132 respondents across all adults aged 16-75 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Ipsos MORI interviewed a representative sample of 2,132 adults in England, Wales and Northern Ireland aged 16-75 online between 5 and 8 March 2021. Data are weighted to the profile of the population. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error.

Related research

Last week we published the [Food in a Pandemic report](#) which explored people’s experiences of food during COVID-19, and the findings from our [Food and You 2 survey](#) which provides more detailed information on the public’s self-reported knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour regarding food safety, including use-by dates.