

Q: I have some foods in my pantry that have been there for a long time. How can I tell if they are still good to eat?

A: If you have reason to question the quality or safety of the food, examine the can or package for any signs of spoilage:

- Bulging cans or cans that spurt liquid when opened
- Rust
- Leakage from the package
- Broken seals or torn packages
- Insect infestation
- Foul odor

If any of these conditions are present, do not eat the food. When in doubt, throw it out! Destroy the food so it will not accidentally be eaten.

If there are no visible signs of spoilage, open the can or package and smell the product for any “off” or “spoiled” odors. If you do not see or smell any signs of spoilage and the can or package is not damaged (dented, torn, or leaking), you must use your best judgment regarding the quality of the food and whether or not to eat it.

A number of factors can shorten the useful life of a food product such as improper handling and inappropriate storage temperatures. The overall quality and nutritional value of the product may begin to decline over a period of time, but this does not mean the food is not safe to eat. The decision to eat the food must be made after carefully considering how the product was stored and handled and the condition of the container. With the exception of infant formula, there is no single date that indicates when a product must be used, and after which it cannot be used.

Q: How should I store foods to maintain top quality?

A: Temperature affects how long all products can be stored, and humidity also affects many products. Cooler temperatures generally lengthen the time products retain their full quality. The same product will last for different periods of time depending on storage conditions.

There are several things you can do to make sure your foods are at their peak quality:

- Store foods under proper conditions:
 - Dry foods: Store in a cool (preferably less than 70 degrees), dry place. Store foods off the floor.
 - Chilled foods: Store in the refrigerator. Always wrap food tightly.
 - Frozen foods: Keep frozen foods frozen. Always wrap food tightly to avoid freezer burn. Do not pack your freezer too tightly...leave room for air to circulate.
- Date the food package when you receive it. Always use the oldest products first. Organize your pantry so the oldest products are near the front.

Q: What do the dates on food packages mean?

A: Different dates on food products mean different things. Some products may have a “best-if-used-by” date. This date means that the manufacturer recommends using the product by this date for the best flavor or quality. This date is NOT a food safety date. At some point after the “best-if-used-by” date, a product may change *very gradually* in taste, color, texture, or nutrient content. But, the product may be wholesome and safe long after that date.

You may also see a “sell-by” date on a food product. This means the manufacturer recommends that a store sell the product by that date; this date does not mean the product must be eaten by that date. The “sell-by” date takes into consideration the product will be stored in your home for a period of time before it is used. Therefore, a “sell-by” date would be reached sooner than a “best-if-used-by” date.

These various dating systems do not represent expiration dates, and they do not indicate when it is safe or not safe to eat a product. The exception to this is infant formulas. Infant formula and some baby foods are unique in that they must be used by the “use-by” date that appears on the package.