

Food Product Dating

The health department's food inspection office fields many phone questions regarding product dating on commercially prepared foods found in retail markets. According to the USDA, the only foods that are required to be dated are infant formula and some baby food. Many companies choose to put dates on their foods as a guarantee of the quality of their product. These companies conduct in-house shelf-life studies to see how long their product can be held before the flavor and quality are affected. This does not affect the safety of the product.

There are three common terms used in date marking.

- **Sell by** tells the store how long to display the product for sale. Consumers are encouraged to purchase these foods before the printed date.
- **Best if used by** indicates that the product is at peak quality if used by the stated date.
- **Use-by** is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality.

None of these dates affect the safety of the food item. Inspectors encourage stores to sell food before the date is reached, but because it does not impact the food's safety, the inspectors cannot require the store to remove the food item from shelves. If you do purchase refrigerated food items that are close to the stated date, you should either eat them shortly after purchasing them, or freeze them.

Baby formula and baby food are date marked for a different reason. The date on infant formula ensures that the nutritional levels stated on the can are still valid. Since formula may be the baby's only nutritional source, this is very important. Furthermore, over time formula may separate. When that occurs, the formula may not flow freely through the nipple on a bottle.

Follow these tips to ensure the packaged food you are buying is still safe. If the product is vacuum packaged, like lunch meats and bacon, make sure there is a strong seal. If the package feels loose around the food, it could have developed a pin-hole leak and a source of contamination. Look at the liquid in the package. If it looks milky or cloudy, do not purchase it. These visual tests are more likely to detect food safety issues than just relying on the date.

For more information, please contact the Springfield-Greene County Health Department at 417-864-1658.