Best before and use-by dates

It is important to understand best before and use-by dates on food labels to keep food safe and to help reduce food waste. Food may contain bacteria, and if stored for too long or at the wrong temperature can cause food poisoning.

Food date labelling

The difference between best before and use-by dates is really important. Some foods deteriorate over time in a way that may present a food safety risk. On most packaged food, depending on the product, you will see either:

- 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. Never eat food after the use-by date, even if it looks and smells ok, as it could make you very ill.

You can eat food until midnight on the use-by date shown on a product, but not after, unless the food has been cooked or frozen. 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 the food's 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.

You can cook food until midnight of the use-by date listed on the product, and then cool and keep it in the fridge. This is because cooking kills any pathogens in the food and gives you a little more time to use it up. You must eat the food within 48 hours or freeze it to eat later. If you freeze the food, make sure that you label what it is and the date it was frozen, so you don’t end up with a UFO (unidentifiable frozen object).

After the use-by date, don't eat, cook or freeze your food. And remember, you cannot smell the bacteria which make you ill.

Best before dates are about quality

The best before date, sometimes shown as BBE (best before end), is about quality and not safety. After the best before date listed on a product, the food will be safe to eat but may not be at its best. 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)
- cheese

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

Tips
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 may choose to use sensory cues to find out if the food is okay to eat. For example, 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 to see whether it has a use-by or best before

- milk with a use-by date should never be used past the date listed, even if it smells fine
- milk with a best before date label can be sniffed to see if it has gone bad and always check the label instructions before using

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

We know many people are concerned about food waste and we welcome safe methods of reducing waste.

To reduce the amount of food you throw away:

- follow storage instructions on the packet
- use up, cook or freeze foods that are approaching their use-by date first
- keep your fridge below 5°C
- plan your meals ahead

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

Freezing acts as a 'pause' button on food. If you freeze food correctly, it won't deteriorate or spoil as bacteria cannot grow on frozen food. However, the longer the food is frozen, the more likely that the texture will be affected. This will not affect safety.

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

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

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.