



## Dates on Food Packages: What Do They Mean?\*

Date labels are common on many types of food packages. But what do they mean? Is it safe for your program to use or distribute food after the package date? The answer is, it depends. Use the information below to help you decide which outdated foods to distribute and which to discard.

### Expiration Dates

- Examples: "Expires 2/15/98" or "Do not use after 7/9/97"
- Look for it on infant formula, vitamins, yeast, baking powder, and cake mixes.
- Do not use or give out infant formulas, vitamins, or drugs after the expiration date. They may lose their effectiveness. Yeast and baking powder may not work.

### Pack Dates

- Examples: "packed on 9/23/98" or "192 VIG 2109"
- This is the type of code used on almost all food packages. Look for it on canned fruits and vegetables, canned meat and fish, boxes of crackers and cookies, and spices.
- It is the date the food was packaged. It may be in code. Usually this food is of good quality for 12-18 months. It will be safe for a very long time.

### Pull Dates

- Example: "Sell by May 16"
- Look for this date on refrigerated foods such as milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, cream, eggs, lunch meat, packaged salad mixes.
- This means the store must take the refrigerated foods off the shelf by the date listed. If the food has been kept refrigerated at the proper temperature, it will still be safe to eat. Do not use it if it smells bad or the seal has been broken.

### Quality Dates

- Examples: "Better if used by date"
- Look for this on packaged mixes, cold cereals, peanut butter, and baby food.
- It means that after the quality date the food will lose its good flavor and develop off-flavors. This date is the estimate for how long it will be in top quality. Do not use or distribute baby food that is past the quality date.

\* Developed by: Sue Butkus, Washington State University Cooperative Extension

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Accessed from:

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[URL: http://www.cfs.purdue.edu/safefood/foodsafety/packagedates.html](http://www.cfs.purdue.edu/safefood/foodsafety/packagedates.html)

## **Critical Container Defects**

### **Critical Can Defects**

The defects described below may affect the integrity of a can and allow microorganisms or other foreign material to enter the can. Cans exhibiting any of these defects should be discarded.

- Swollen cans may indicate the presence of microbial spoilage or a reaction product with the metal can material causing hydrogen gas production.

**\*\*Never taste product from a swollen can!! Throw it away!!\*\***

- Sharp dent on the seam or a sharp dent on either the top or side seam can damage the seam and allow microorganisms to enter the can. Discard cans with sharp dents on any seam.
- Holes, fractures, or punctures can permit microorganisms to enter. Discard cans with these defects.
- Rust severe enough to cause pitting means that the tin plate surface of the metal is corroded and that the other layers of metal also may be affected. There may be tiny holes you can't see. Discard cans with pitted rust. Surface rust that you can remove by rubbing is not serious and you can keep these cans.

### **Critical Bottle Defects**

Bottles with any of the following defects should be discarded:

- Chipped necks and threads of glass could break off into the product.
- Cracks can allow microorganisms to enter.
- Discoloration can indicate that the product is old or contaminated.

### **Critical Paperboard Carton Defects**

Product in a paperboard carton, like those typically used for cereal or pasta, may be acceptable even if it appears severely damaged providing the inner pouch is intact. Open damaged cartons and check to see if the inner pouch is sealed. If it is, the product is acceptable. If it is not, discard the product.

## **Tamper Evident Indicators (freshness seals)**

The law requires tamper evident packaging for over the counter drugs. Although this type of packaging is not required on food packages, many food companies have voluntarily used tamper evident indicators or freshness seals for a variety of food packages. Packages with missing or damaged freshness seals should be discarded. The following are some commonly used tamper evident indicators:

- Inner membrane--foil and/or plastic liner on inside of bottle or plastic tub. Products that use inner membranes include dairy products, snack foods, and ketchup bottles.
- Tear away ring--plastic band that must be torn off to open package and the ring does not remain on the package. Products that use tear away rings include cottage cheese and milk.
- Break away ring--attached to base of screw cap lid. When the cap is twisted off, the plastic band will break away from the base of the cap and remain on the neck of the bottle to indicate that the bottle has been opened. Products using break away rings include carbonated beverage bottles and salad dressing bottles.
- Pop up button cap--button pops up when jar is opened and vacuum seal is broken. Products using pop up button caps include baby food and mushroom jars.
- Shrink band--band of plastic around cap and neck of a bottle that must be torn and removed to open the bottle. Products using shrink bands include peanut butter jars and pancake syrup bottles.

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## Donated Food Checklist

Both SAFETY (whether a food is free of disease-causing bacteria and their toxins) and QUALITY (whether a food looks and smells acceptable to eat) should be kept in mind when examining donated food.

Beware of these signs that food may be UNSAFE to eat.

### Foods Stored at Room Temperature

#### Cans

- Too crushed to stack on shelves or open with a manual can opener
- Crushed immediately under the double (end) seam
- Moderate/severe dents at the juncture of side and double (end) seam
- Rust pits severe enough to pierce the can
- Swollen or bulging ends
- Holes, fractures, or punctures
- Evidence of leakage
- Signs of spoilage (spurting; unusual odor or appearance) when opened
- Baby food or formula past the expiration date
- Missing label

#### Glass Jars

- Home-canned instead of commercially canned
- Raised, crooked, or loosened lid
- Damaged tamper-resistant seal
- Cracks or chips
- Signs of spoilage (discolored food; cloudy liquid)

\_\_\_ Dirt under the rim

\_\_\_ Baby food past the expiration date

### **Paperboard Cartons**

\_\_\_ Torn or missing inner packaging in cartons that are slit or opened

\_\_\_ Evidence of insects

\_\_\_ Baby food past the expiration date

### **Plastic Containers**

\_\_\_ Damaged tamper-resistant seal

\_\_\_ Signs of spoilage (mold, off odor)

\_\_\_ Baby food past the expiration date

### **Foods Stored in the Refrigerator**

\_\_\_ Lukewarm food (above 40° Refrigerator temperature)

\_\_\_ Signs of spoilage (unusual odor or appearance, molds)

\_\_\_ Unsuitable containers (and/or covers) that allow food to be contaminated

\_\_\_ Uncertain handling "history" (questionable reputation of food source)

\_\_\_ Damaged tamper-resistant seals if commercially packaged

### **Foods Stored in the Freezer**

\_\_\_ Evidence of thawing (ice on the food or leaking)

(Note: See Perishable Food Decision Table [page 65] to decide what to do with these foods.)

\_\_\_ Unsuitable packaging that allows food to be contaminated

## **IF IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT!**

Don't rely on look or smell. Foods that cause food poisoning may look fine and smell acceptable.

Never taste suspicious foods!

\* Adapted from Carolyn Raab, Extension Food and Nutrition Specialist, Oregon State University Extension Service.

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