

Expiry and Best Before Dates

What's All the Confusion?

Food we get at food banks doesn't always look like it does in the grocery store. Sometimes the reason we receive food in the first place is because the package is torn or there's no label. This is a reality food programs must learn to work with in order to save good food from going to a landfill and to get food to those who need it most.

Our responsibility is to be experts in determining which food is still good to eat and nutritious – to look past torn boxes and to understand what dates mean. We need to know what food is safe to eat, and what food is not.

“I went to the food bank and all they gave me were expired cans!”

- Most common complaint from people coming to food banks

Definitions

Shelf Life

The length of time an item remains usable, fit for consumption, or saleable.

Non-perishable

Food that is not subject to rapid deterioration or decay.

Non-perishable foods can be stored for long periods of time and still remain safe to eat. Non-perishable foods include dry and canned goods.

Best Before Date

This refers to food that has a shelf life of less than 90 days (e.g. Dairy products, fresh meat or egg products, etc.) and is still unopened. For these perishable products, it's a good idea to adhere to the best before date as closely as possible. If the date is close or just past the best before date, you need to use your senses to determine if it is still alright to eat. Does it smell bad or look bad?

For non-perishable food, the company that makes or distributes the food may choose to include a best before date but is not required. In fact, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) does not have any standards around this. Non-perishable food like this can be eaten after the best before date has passed.

Expiry Date

Some products are required to have expiry dates printed on the packaging. This is more about freshness than food safety, because after that date passes, the food quality can't be guaranteed or it can no longer provide the amount of nutrition promised on the label. If the product is something like baby formula or a meal replacement such as Boost or Ensure, where the food is made to be the sole source of nutrition, paying attention to expiry dates is very important.

In either case, dates printed on packaging have nothing to do with food safety or whether the food might make you ill. Dates on products are about the freshness of the product, but won't tell you if the food is still safe to eat.

Is It Safe To Eat?

Each agency must develop or adapt a policy about food sorting and stick to it. It's important that everyone in the food program is educated about sorting various products and can answer questions that clients might have about best before or expiration dates.



Canned Goods

LOOK FOR:

- **Can is swollen/bulging**
- **Can is leaking/has mould**
- **Rust or corrosion on the can**
- **Label missing or can't be read**

REMEMBER:

Canned food can be used past the date if the can is in good condition. There is no time limit after the best before date is passed. For example, Daily Bread Food Bank will keep products up to two years past the printed date. A canned item with a date of 2010 would be kept until 2012. If it was sorted after 2012, it would be discarded.



Dry Goods

LOOK FOR:

- **Rips or tears in the inner packaging**
- **Water or moisture damage on the package**
- **Signs of chewing or pest infestation**

REMEMBER:

Packaged food often has an inner liner. If the box is damaged, the inside liner may still be intact. Check packaging to make sure there is no product coming out. If there is, discard the entire product. Dry foods can be used past the best before date if the packaging is in good condition. There is no time limit after the best before date is passed. For example, Daily Bread keeps products up to two years past the printed best before date. A dry item with a date of 2010 would be kept until 2012. If it was sorted after this date, it would be discarded.



Fresh Produce

LOOK FOR:

- **Bruising or brown spots**
- **Mould and/or soft spots**

REMEMBER:

Much of the produce sent will have to be sorted at the agency before it is distributed. Throw out items that are rotten, soft when they aren't supposed to be, or badly bruised.



Dairy

LOOK FOR:

- **Look at the best before date printed on the item**
- **Watch for signs of bulging, or damaged packaging**
- **Throw out products that smell bad or have a consistency that looks wrong**

REMEMBER:

Dairy can be stored frozen for up to three months and will be safe to use if it is thawed in the refrigerator. Do not thaw dairy products at room temperature. Regardless of date, always check dairy products to ensure their quality.



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Food Bank

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