

Best if Used By Guidance

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## **BEST IF USED BY GUIDANCE FOOD MANAGEMENT IN HOUSEHOLDS**

**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: From the USDA FNS Policy Memo FD-107 entitled “*Storage and Inventory Management of USDA Donated Foods*” dated June 9, 2010:

As a general rule, distributing and recipient agencies should use a first-in-first-out (FIFO) system of inventory management. In order to implement FIFO, USDA donated food cases or other containers should be marked with the date of their receipt at the storage facility. However, distributing and recipient agencies should also be aware of dates placed on food products by the manufacturers that help to determine how long food products can be expected to remain in optimal condition. Such product dates must be considered, along with FIFO, in management of donated food inventories.

Because different product dates have different meanings, it is important to know which product date is used and to understand what it means. It is also important to understand that, except for expiration dates, product dates do not necessarily indicate when foods are no longer safe to consume. The following paragraphs describe the meaning of some product dates that may be found on USDA donated foods.

**Expiration and Use-by Dates**

Generally, “expiration” dates and “use-by” dates are the last dates that the manufacturer *recommends* a food item be consumed to ensure peak quality and nutrient retention. However, there is no regulation requiring that manufacturers mark their product with such dates. The one exception these general rules is infant formula. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires manufacturers mark infant formula with a “use-by” date. Additionally, the FDA prohibits the sale of infant formula after the use-by date. In accordance with FDA rules, infant formula that is past its use-by date must not be distributed to program recipients. Similarly, per manufacturer recommendations regarding other foods, other USDA donated food that is past its expiration date or its use by date must not be distributed to program recipients. Accordingly, distributing and recipient agencies must manage their inventories to ensure that program recipients have an opportunity to consume all USDA donated foods (i.e., infant formula and other foods) before their expiration dates or use-by dates have passed.

**Best-if-used-by Dates**

A “best-if-used-by” date is the last date a food item will be at its peak, in terms of flavor and quality. At some point after that date, the product will begin to undergo changes in taste, color, texture, and/or nutrient content. However, the product may be wholesome and safe to consume, and retain most of its nutrient value, long after the “best-if-used-by” date. Nevertheless, distributing and recipient agencies must consider “best-if-used-by” dates in managing their USDA donated food inventories, and distribute USDA donated foods in a manner that allows

them to be consumed by such date.

**Sell-by Dates and Pack Dates**

A "sell-by" date is the date by which the manufacturer recommends that a store sell the food product, and is not necessarily a reliable indicator of how long it may retain its wholesomeness or nutritional value.

A "pack date" indicates when the product was packaged or processed. While it may help to determine the age of the product, it does not necessarily provide useful information on its wholesomeness or nutritional value

**NOTE: These various dating systems do not indicate when it is safe or not safe to eat a product.**

## **BEST IF USED BY GUIDANCE WAREHOUSE INVENTORY CONTROL**

### **Q: How can I effectively manage my inventory to ensure quality products are being served?**

A: The most basic rule of inventory management is first-in-first-out (FIFO)...foods delivered to the warehouse first (first in) should be the first items distributed to recipient agencies (first out); however, a warehouse could receive multiple dates of the same product and must manage FIFO accordingly. Refer to the various dating systems, as defined above, from the USDA FNS Memo FD-107, entitled “*Storage and Inventory Management of USDA Donated Foods*”, for the basic definitions often found on USDA donated foods.

When multiple dates on the same product are present, the first items to be distributed to recipient agencies (first-out) must be distributed utilizing the nearest expiration, “Best-if-used-by”, or “use-by” dates first. If expiration, “Best-if-used-by”, or “use-by” dates are not present on the product, pack dates must then be used to determine the first product to be distributed. In the absence of all other dating, received dates must be used to determine FIFO.

You can achieve an acceptable level of accuracy by **marking the pallets, or cases if you receive mixed pallets, with the appropriate dates (expiration, “Best-if-used-by”, use-by, pack, and/or received dates) and practicing FIFO**. This will significantly reduce the risk of product going out of condition. Also, consider the amount of product already in inventory. Excessive inventory increases the risk of product going out of condition.

**Storage conditions** have a significant impact on the quality of food products. The same product will last for different periods of time depending on the temperature of the warehouse, the humidity level, and air circulation. In general, cool temperatures and low humidity provide the best storage conditions. Store food off the floor and away from contact with walls and ceilings.

### **Q: How can I tell when a product has gone out of condition? Is there a single date I can refer to?**

A: USDA donated foods that show signs of spoilage, infestation, or other visible defects should not be used or distributed, regardless of product dates or when the foods were received, as such food is generally considered not fit for human consumption. If there are no visible defects but there is a question as to the wholesomeness or safety of USDA donated foods, the distributing or recipient agency must have the foods inspected by State or local health authorities as soon as possible, and must contact DACS before taking further action.

There is no single date that a storage facility can refer to for determination of out-of-condition product. Refer to the various dating systems, as defined above, from the USDA FNS Memo FD-107, entitled “*Storage and Inventory Management of USDA Donated Foods*”.

Entities with USDA donated foods in storage must consider expiration, “Best-if-used-by”, or “use-by” dates in managing their USDA donated food inventories.

USDA donated food must be distributed with enough time to allow program recipients (households) the opportunity to consume all USDA donated foods (i.e., infant formula and other foods) before their

expiration, “Best-if-used-by”, or “use-by” dates have passed. Warehouses must manage their inventories to ensure that the food is distributed to all entities further down the supply chain prior to reaching any of the aforementioned dates, as well as allowing ample opportunity for further distribution and storage if necessary prior to reaching program recipients .

Failure to distribute USDA donated food to program recipients prior to the expiration, “Best-if-used-by”, or “use-by” date may be considered a loss of USDA donated food.