

How to read food date labels and packaging

Date labelling on pre-packaged foods

Information about dates on pre-packaged food is a valuable source of information. Here are some terms you should be familiar with:

Durable life - This indicates the anticipated amount of time an unopened food product will keep its freshness, taste, nutritional value and other qualities when stored under appropriate conditions. A «best before» date tells you when the «durable life» period ends.

Best before date - The «best before» date does not guarantee product safety, but it does give you information about the freshness and potential shelf-life of the unopened food you are buying. This must appear on pre-packaged foods that will keep fresh for 90 days or less. Retail-packaged foods may be labelled with either a “best before” date and storage instructions, or the date packaged, along with a “best before” date and storage instructions.

Fast facts

Food with an anticipated shelf life greater than 90 days are not required to be labelled with a “best before” date or storage information.

Use by date - This may appear instead of «best before» on pre-packaged fresh yeast only.

Expiration date - This must appear on formulated liquid diets, foods for use in a very low-energy diet, meal replacements, nutritional supplements and infant formulas. After the expiration date, the food may not have the same nutrient content declared on the label. If the expiration date has passed, throw away the food.

How it's presented

The “best before” date must be identified using the words “best before” and “meilleure avant” together with the date. These can appear anywhere on a package -- and if on the bottom, that placement should be indicated elsewhere on the label. The month of expiration must be in both official languages or indicated by using specified bilingual symbols. The year is optional, unless it is needed for clarity (e.g., if the shelf life extends into a new calendar year).

If included, the year must appear first, followed by the month, and then the day:

Best before

11 JA 22

Meilleur avant

Monthly bilingual symbols

- January: JA
- February: FE
- March: MR
- April: AL
- May: MA
- June: JN
- July: JL
- August: AU
- September: SE
- October: OC
- November: NO
- December: DE

Passed the “best before” date?

You can buy and eat foods after the “best before” date has passed. It may have lost some of its freshness, flavour and nutritional value, and its texture may have changed.

Remember, “best before” dates are not indicators of food safety. They apply to unopened products only. Once opened, the shelf life of a food may change. Never use your nose, eyes or taste buds to judge the safety of food. If in doubt, throw it out.

Fresh food and produce

Foods that are likely to spoil should be properly stored, and they should be eaten as quickly as possible. Harmful micro-organisms that lead to foodborne illness can grow in foods, even if they do not appear to be spoiled.

