U.S FOOD LABEL MYSTERY # 1 SELL-BY

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Do I Throw it Out?
Unveiling the Mystery Behind Food Sell-By-Labels

Bring your curiosity and questions about the sell-by-date label on packaged foods that you buy. Just what is it telling you?

Who regulates sell-by labels anyway? Do these labels make us waste edible food or do they help us avoid food-borne illness?

Conduct your own investigation by categorizing typical labels and sharing your results, using your senses to estimate "time to throw it out" and voting on suggested designs that ensure quality and safety while avoiding food waste.
The **Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** is responsible for assuring that foods sold in the United States are safe, wholesome and properly labeled: domestically produced as well as foods from foreign countries.

The Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (FD&C Act) and the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act govern food products under FDA's jurisdiction. The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) requires that most foods have [nutrition labeling](#) and that nutrient content claims and certain health messages to comply with requirements.
The Principal Display Panel (PDP) contains the name of the food and the net quantity statement, which specifically states how much the package contains. It is the area of a package label where you are most likely to look.

The Information Panel is to the immediate right of the PDP and includes the name and address of the manufacturer, packer or distributor, the ingredient list, as well as nutrition labeling.

- The Principal Display Panel (PDP) is the primary side of the label that the consumer will view — this is usually the front of the package
- Two required elements
  - Statement of Identity
    (common or usual name of food)
  - Net Quantity Declaration
The ingredient list on a food label is the listing of each ingredient in descending order of predominance.

Even water that is added in the making of a food is considered an ingredient. A trace ingredient, or one that is present in a small amount, is listed if it is present in a significant amount and has a function in the finished food.
Chemical Preservatives

The statement “may contain corn, soybean or peanut oil” is an example of an alternate listing that is used when the manufacturer is unable to predict which fat or oil ingredient will be used.

When an approved chemical preservative is added to a food, the ingredient list includes both the common or usual name of the preservative and the function of the preservative by including terms such as "preservative," "to retard spoilage," "a mold inhibitor," "to help protect flavor," or "to promote color retention."

“Now that I’m in midlife, I read all the food labels. I can use all the preservatives I can get.”
Food Allergy Warning

People with allergies check ingredient lists to determine if any substances they wish to avoid, such as peanuts or sulfate, are present.

Generally speaking, the first five ingredients make the greatest contribution and are present in the largest amount. For example, someone who wishes to limit intake of high fructose corn syrup might reconsider a food where it appears among the top ingredients.
A new look: increased size of calories, servings per contain, serving size along with bolded calories; actual amount declared for vitamin D, calcium, iron & potassium

Added sugars spelled out in grams
Vitamins A & C – voluntarily included
Calories from fat removed
Serving size “what likely eat not should eat”
Package size “what people eat in one sitting”
Eating Healthy – Labels Help

The Percent Daily Value (%DV) indicates the contribution that the product makes to a 2,000-Calorie diet. For some people, this is too many Calories; for others, too few. A percent of five or less indicates that the product is low in a particular nutrient; one of 20% or more indicates that it is high.

**Moderation, Balance, and Variety** in your eating habits is challenging with so many choices. How do you begin? Start by choosing foods that are nutrient-dense. These foods offer substantial nutritional benefit without adding unneeded Calories, saturated fat and trans fats, cholesterol, added sugars, salt, or alcohol. Guides for adopting a balanced eating pattern include the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) MyPlate or the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) Eating Plan.
Nutrition Facts Pointers

Look for products that contain **less than 5 grams of fat per serving** with no trans fats. Limit consumption of fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol.

If the food is made with grains, such as breads and cereals, look for a **minimum of 3 grams of fiber** per serving with a goal of 25-30 grams per day. In this case, more is better!

Compare sugar to carbohydrate total. **If over half** the grams of carbohydrate are provided by sugar, **limit use** of the product - it contains too much sugar. The less, the better!

Limit daily intake of sodium. Moderate consumption of food or drink containing more than 150 milligrams of sodium. Sodium is found in almost everything, even water, and daily intake should not exceed 2,300 milligrams. **Avoid any one food that has too much sodium**, or make it a once-in-a-while treat. ([U.S Dietary Guidelines](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov) )
For meat, poultry, and egg products under the jurisdiction of the [Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)](https://www.fsis.usda.gov), dates may be voluntarily provided if they are labeled in a truthful manner, not misleading and meet regulations.

A **calendar date** must express both the month and day of the month. In the case of shelf-stable and frozen products, the year must also be displayed. Additionally, immediately adjacent to the date must be a phrase explaining the meaning of that date such as "Best if Used By."
Food Product Dating

Two types of product dating may be on a label. "Open Dating" a calendar date applied by the manufacturer or retailer. It provides consumers with information on the estimated period of time for which the product is of best quality. It also helps the store know how long to display the product for sale.

“Closed Dating” is a code that consists of a series of letters and/or numbers applied by manufacturers to identify the date and time of production.
Open Dating on an Egg Carton

Open dating is found on most foods including meat, poultry, egg and dairy products. "Closed or coded dates" are a series of letters and/or numbers and typically appear on shelf-stable products such as cans and boxes of food.

There are no uniform or universally accepted descriptions used on food labels for open dating in the United States. As a result, there are a wide variety of phrases used on labels to describe quality dates.
Packing codes are a type of closed dating for tracking in interstate commerce. They enable manufacturers to rotate stock and locate products in the event of a recall. Codes appear as a series of letters and/or numbers and refer to the date the product was canned. The codes are not meant for the consumer to interpret as a "Best if Used By" date.

Cans may also display "open" or calendar dates. Usually these are "Best if Used By" dates for peak quality.
Food Safety or Quality?

Manufacturers provide dating to help consumers and retailers decide when food is of **best quality**. Except for infant formula, dates are **not** an indicator of the product’s **safety** and are not required by Federal law.

The length of time and the temperature at which a food is held during distribution and offered for sale, the characteristics of the food, and the type of packaging will affect how long a product will be of optimum quality.
Signs of Spoiled Food

Spoiled foods will develop an off odor, flavor or texture due to naturally occurring spoilage bacteria. Microorganisms such as molds, yeasts, and bacteria multiply and cause food to spoil. Viruses are not capable of growing in food and do not cause spoilage.

There are two types of bacteria that can be found on food: pathogenic bacteria, which cause foodborne illness, and spoilage bacteria, which cause foods to deteriorate and develop unpleasant characteristics such as an undesirable taste or odor making the food not wholesome, but do not cause illness.

When spoilage bacteria have nutrients (food), moisture, time, and favorable temperatures, these conditions will allow the bacteria to grow rapidly and affect the quality of the food. Food spoilage can occur much faster if it is not stored or handled properly. A change in the color of meat or poultry is not an indicator of spoilage.
To reduce food waste, it is important to understand that the dates applied to food are for **quality** and not for **safety**.

Food products are safe to consume **past the date** on the label, and regardless of the date, consumers should evaluate the safety of a food product prior to its consumption.
Date Labeling and Food Waste

USDA estimates 30 percent of the food supply is wasted at the retail and consumer levels.

One cause is consumers or retailers throwing away wholesome food because of confusion about the meaning of dates on the label. FSIS recommends that food manufacturers and retailers use "Best if Used By".

This phrase conveys that the product is of best quality if used by the calendar date shown. Foods not exhibiting signs of spoilage should be wholesome and may be sold, purchased, donated and consumed beyond the labeled "Best if Used By" date.
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