

Shelf Life of Food

Oregon Food Bank often distributes food items that are “past date.”

Food manufacturers use different date codes to insure that consumers receive their product at peak quality. Once a product is past that date, many manufacturers or retailers donate it to food banks. Food Bank staff monitors this food to ensure that the quality remains good. **This food is still safe to eat!**

This guide explains “shelf life”, or how long a food is good past its code date.

What do the dates on food packages mean?

The only foods that are required by federal law to have expiration dates are baby food, infant formula, and over-the-counter medications.

- Baby food should NOT be distributed past its expiration date.
- Many canned and boxed products are safe to eat long after the date on the container, and the shelf life of refrigerated and frozen foods can be extended if they are handled properly.
- Once a perishable item is properly frozen, it is safe indefinitely, although the quality slowly deteriorates over time.

Here are some code dates you may see on food packages:

Expiration Date (Examples: “Expires 2/15/12” or “Do not use after 2/15/12”)

Look for it on: Baby food and formula, medicines, vitamins, yeast, baking powder. **What it means:** Do not distribute infant formula, vitamins, medicines or nutritional supplement beverage after the expiration date! Yeast and baking powder work less well after expiration but are safe to eat.

Pack Date (Examples: “Packed on 2/15/12” or “192 VIG 2109”)

Look for it on: Canned food, crackers, cookies, spices.

What it means: This is the date the food was packaged. The code is used by the manufacturer. Usually this food is of good quality and safe to eat past the date.

Sell By Date, or Pull Date (Example: “Sell by 2/15/12” or “Best by 2/15/12”)

Look for it on: Refrigerated foods such as milk, yogurt, tofu, packaged salad, dips.

What it means: The store must sell these foods before the date listed and often donates them when they are close to date. If the food has been handled properly it is still safe to eat. Food bank staff monitors this food to ensure that the quality remains good.

Use By Date (Example: “Use by 2/15/12”)

Look for it on: Refrigerated food such as meat, deli items, bagged spinach.

What it means: Food must be distributed or frozen by this date. We recommend that frozen food be distributed within three months. Fresh Alliance meats are frozen on or before the use by date, and should be distributed within three months.

Any package that is open or leaking should be discarded immediately, regardless of date.

Please refer to your Fresh Alliance poster for information on how long particular items can be kept safely.

