



This Food Science Fact Sheet is one of a series compiled by Institute of Food Science and Technology, providing clear, concise and scientifically reliable information on key food science topics for consumers.

Date Labelling of Pre-Packaged Food

Manufacturers have an obligation to ensure that food products can be enjoyed at their best and do not present a food safety hazard for the consumer, provided they are stored correctly. It is important that consumers understand this and follow the appropriate instructions (dates and storage conditions) printed on food labels.

What are commonly used date labelling terms?

On certain products it is mandatory to provide information to the consumer in the form of a "use by" or "best before" date on food packaging.

"Use by" date is about safety. It is applied to highly perishable foods such as smoked fish, fresh meat, meat products, sandwiches and cream cakes. Food shouldn't be eaten beyond its "use by" date as it poses a food safety hazard to your health. It is illegal to sell or display food beyond its "use by" date.

For the "use by" to be a valid guide, you must follow storage instructions on pack, particularly the instructions for storage once the pack has been opened.

Products featuring a "use by" label must specify the day and month and possibly the year in an uncoded format. In most cases, due to the shorter shelf life of these products, you will only see the day and month information provided, e.g. pre-packaged sliced ham: *Use by 5th March. Once opened use within 2 days.*

"Best before" date is about quality. It appears on a wide range of frozen, dried, tinned and other foods. Food must keep its specific properties until that date. Any special storage conditions should be stated on pack. The food will still be safe to eat after its "best

before" date but its flavour and/or texture might not be at its best.

It is not illegal to sell food past its "best before" date unless it has deteriorated.

Food with a "best before" date must be labelled as following:

- Products with less than a 3-month shelf life must state the day and month on the pack e.g. *Best before 6th April*
- Products with a shelf life between 3 and 18 months must state the month end and year e.g. *Best before end June 2016*
- Products with a shelf life over 18 months must state year e.g. *Best before end of 2017*

You may see additional voluntary terms in use on packs such as "sell by" or "display until". These are used by retailers for stock control purposes and are not required by law.

The important dates for you to look for are "use by" and "best before" dates.

Which products are exempt from date coding?

Under the current regulations (Food Information for Consumers (Food Information for Consumers Regulation EU 1169/2011), the following products do not require date coding:

- Fresh fruit and vegetables, including potatoes, which have not been peeled, cut or similarly treated; this does not apply to sprouting seeds or similar products e.g. beansprouts

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- Wines, liqueur wines, sparkling wines, aromatised wines and similar products obtained from fruit other than grapes
- Beverages containing 10% or more by volume of alcohol
- Bakers' wares which, given the nature of their content, are normally consumed within 24 hours of their manufacture
- Vinegar
- Cooking salt
- Solid sugar
- Confectionery products consisting almost solely of flavoured and/or coloured sugars
- Chewing gum and similar chewing products



- Products being packed in a controlled atmosphere at the point of manufacture which inhibits/slows spoilage e.g. raw meat
- Sterile packing conditions in the factory which are not replicated in the home e.g. UHT milk
- Canned products which are packed under vacuum, heat treated and stored in the absence of air
- Moisture tight packaging which prevents product deterioration e.g. biscuits

What temperatures should you be storing your chilled products at?

Ideally your fridge temperature should be 5°C or below. At these temperatures food spoilage bacteria are unable to grow or grow slowly and therefore the appropriate temperature ensures that chilled foods have the correct shelf life.

Many domestic fridges tend to operate at temperatures above those for optimal chilled foods storage. Therefore, it is worth investing in a simple fridge thermometer and ensuring you follow good hygiene and storage practices.

It is also very important to minimise the time between your purchase and food home storage for chilled and frozen products. This can be achieved by planning to purchase those products as your last shop before returning home and using insulated chill bags for the transportation step.

Your fridge temperature should be 5°C or below.

How is shelf life determined?

To provide the best shelf life guidance and ensure food can be enjoyed safely with minimal food waste, manufacturers set up shelf life trials to simulate typical supply chain conditions from the manufacturer through the distribution chain to the retail onto the home purchase and storage. These trials are used to set the "use by" or "best before" date.

How should food be stored?

It is essential to follow the instructions for storage provided on pack. Failure to do so is likely to impact on product quality and shorten the shelf life leading to increased waste.

In most cases once food is opened, the period in which it must be consumed is shortened. It may also lead to a change in the required storage conditions. These recommendations may be based on food safety and/or quality deterioration.

There are many reasons for the shelf life reduction and required change in storage conditions which include:

References

Guidance on food labelling terms: <https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/food-labelling-terms.aspx#sell>

FSA Guidance on food labelling: <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-industry/guidancenotes/labelregsguidance>

FSA Guidance on food hygiene in the kitchen: <https://www.food.gov.uk/news-updates/campaigns/kitchen-check/kitchen-check1/tool>

EU Food Information for Consumers Regulation: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011R1169&from=EN>

Wrap food waste reduction initiative through better date code labelling: <http://www.wrap.org.uk/food-date-labelling>

FSA guidance on refrigeration temperatures: <https://www.food.gov.uk/news-updates/campaigns-0/germwatch/science-fsw/fridge-temperatures>