# Food Product Dating

“Best if Used By” is a type of date you might find on a meat, poultry, or egg product label. Are dates required for these food products? Does it mean the product will be unsafe to use after that date? Here is some background information answering these and other questions about product dating. Additional information on safe food handling practices can be found at Check Your Steps: Food Safe Families.

## What Is Food Product Dating?

Two types of product dating may be shown on a product label. First, “Open Dating” is a calendar date applied to a food product by the manufacturer or retailer. The calendar date provides consumers with information on the estimated period for which the product will be of the best quality. The calendar date also helps stores determine how long to display the product for sale. Third, “Closed Dating” is a code comprised of a series of letters and/or numbers applied by manufacturers to identify the date and time of production.

## Does Federal Law Require Dating?

Except for infant formula, product dating is not required by federal regulations.

For meat, poultry, and egg products under the jurisdiction of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), dates may be voluntarily applied provided they are labeled in a manner that is truthful, not misleading, and in compliance with FSIS regulations (9 CFR 317.8 and 381.129). To comply, a calendar date must express both the month and day of the month. With shelf stable and frozen products, the year must also be displayed. Immediately next to the date must be a phrase explaining the meaning of that date (e.g., Best if Used By).

## What Types of Food Are Dated?

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

## What Date-Labeling Phrases Are Used?

There are no uniform or universally excepted descriptions used on food labels for open dating in the United States. As a result, there is a wide variety of phrases used on labels to describe quality dates.

* A “Best if Used By/Before” date indicates when a product will be of the best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
* A “Sell By date” tells the store how long to display the product for sale for inventory management. It is not a safety date.
* A “Use By” date is the last date recommended for use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date unless used on infant formula.

## What Date-Labeling Phrase Does FSIS Recommend?

Since the 1990’s, the USDA estimates food loss and waste at thirty percent of the food supply lost or wasted by retailers and consumers. One source of food waste is from consumers or retailers throwing away wholesome food because of confusion about the meaning of dates displayed on the product’s label. To reduce consumer confusion and wasted food, FSIS recommends that food manufacturers (and retailers that apply product dating) use a “Best if Used By” date. Research shows that this phrase conveys to consumers that the product will be of the best quality if used by the calendar date shown. Foods not showing signs of spoilage should be wholesome and may be sold, purchased, donated, and consumed beyond the labeled “Best if Used By” date.