

FOOD SCIENCE FACT SHEET



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

Why do we need Date Labelling?

Manufacturers have a responsibility to ensure that food products can be enjoyed at their best and do not present a food safety hazard for the consumer, when stored correctly. Manufacturers should ensure that their date and storage instructions are designed not only to ensure food safety (prevent illness) and enjoyment but also to minimise food waste. It is important that consumers understand and follow the instructions (dates and storage conditions) printed on food packaging.

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 although there is no prescribed list of which foods should carry which date labelling information.

Use-by advises consumers about food safety. It is used on foods that are highly perishable, such as smoked fish, 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 it to be a valid guide, you must follow the storage instructions on the pack, particularly the instructions for storage once the pack has been opened.

Products with a use-by label must specify the date in an uncoded format. Normally, 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 informs consumers about food quality and deterioration (e.g. mould on hard cheese, reduced flavour of biscuits and snacks).

It appears on a wide range of biscuits, frozen, and canned foods, as well as those in jars, also on a few chilled items. Food properly stored will keep its specific properties (qualities) until its best before date, after which, it will still be safe to eat, but its flavour and/or texture might not be at its best. Any special storage conditions should be stated on the pack.

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

Food with a best before date must be labelled as follows:

- 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 month end and year e.g. *Best before end June 2022*
- Products with a shelf life over 18 months must state year e.g. *Best before end of 2023*

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 the **use-by** and **best before** dates.

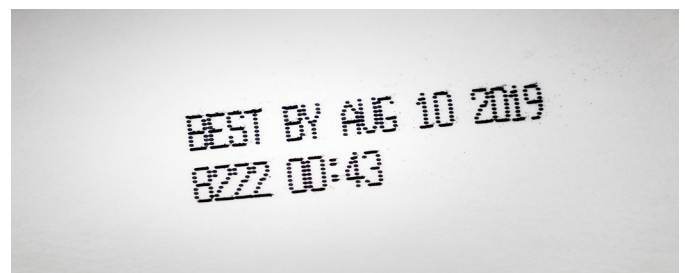


Image 1: Example of a Best Before date on food packaging

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Which products are exempt from date coding?

Under the current regulations, (Food Information for Consumers retained EU Regulation 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 (N.B. this does not apply to sprouting seeds or similar products e.g. beansprouts, which should carry a use-by datemark)
- 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 gums and similar chewing products

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 retailer and onto 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 storage instructions provided on the pack. Failure to do so is likely to impact product quality and shorten its shelf life leading to increased risk of illness or levels of food waste.

In most cases once a packaged 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 change in required storage conditions which include:

- 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.

In all of the above examples, once opened the conditions around the product are different, and so the shelf life will change as a result.

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 home storage for chilled and frozen products. This can be achieved by planning to purchase these types of products last, and using insulated chill bags, when taking food home for refrigeration.

References

1. Guidance on food labelling terms: <https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/food-labelling-terms.aspx#sel>
2. FSA Guidance on food labelling: <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-industry/guidancenotes/labelregsguidance>
3. EU Food Information for Consumers Regulation: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011R1169&from=EN>
4. WRAP food waste reduction initiative through better date code labelling: <http://www.wrap.org.uk/food-date-labelling>
5. FSA guidance on refrigeration temperatures: <https://www.food.gov.uk/news-updates/campaigns-0/germwatch/science-fsw/fridge-temperatures>
6. IFST Food Waste factsheet: https://www.ifst.org/sites/default/files/Food_Waste.pdf
7. FSA guidance on understanding use-by and best before dates: <https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/best-before-and-use-by-dates>
8. Food and Drink Federation guidance on date marking: <https://www.fdf.org.uk/globalassets/resources/publications/guidance/fdf-guidance-on-date-marking-use-by-best-before.pdf>

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