**Food Quality Guide**

**Food manufacturers label products with ‘manufacturing code’, ‘sell-by’, ‘use-by’, ‘best-by’, and/or ‘expiration’ dates. What do these dates mean?**

**Manufacturing Code Date**

A manufacturing code tells us the date the product was manufactured. This does not provide information relating to the product's freshness or suitability for use.

**Dates on Packaging**

The ‘expiration’, ‘sell-by’, ‘best-by’, or ‘use-by’ dates listed on food product packaging and/or BRAFB Shopping List Reports provide information on freshness or suitability for use. Once these dates pass, the product is said to have exceeded its ‘shelf life’.

**In most cases, a product does not become unhealthy or unsafe simply because it has exceeded its ‘shelf life’.**

Rather, the product may simply degrade in quality, rather than in safety. Many foods can be eaten safely for weeks, months, or even years after the date listed on the product package. This document provides tips on how long food can be stored before eating. The tips and storage times below are guidelines, not hard and fast rules.

**Remember: “When in doubt, throw it out!”**

**Storage Guidelines**

* Set refrigerators to 33ºF to 41ºF, and freezers to 0ºF or below. Keep thermometers in all units; check them regularly.
* Don’t overfill refrigerators or freezers — air must circulate to cool foods evenly.
* Don’t defrost foods at room temperature — defrost in the refrigerator, in a sealed package in cold water, or in the microwave.
* Store shelf-stable foods indoors in a clean, dry, cool place (at or below 70ºF).
* Don’t use food from cans that are leaking, rusting, bulging, badly dented, or with a foul odor, nor any container that spurts liquid when you open it.
* Baby food and formula must be thrown away once expired according to FDA guidelines.
* **Remember: “When in doubt, throw it out!”**

**Perishable Foods**

Foods that were refrigerated or frozen on their use-by date can typically be stored in their unopened packaging and safely eaten according to the following chart:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Product** | **Past Date in Refrigerator** | **Past Date in Freezer\*** |
| Beef, ground | 1—2 days | 3—4 months |
| Beef, steaks & roasts | 3—5 days | 6—9 months |
| Berries | 3 days | 1 year |
| Bread | 7—14 days | 3 months |
| Carrots | 3 weeks | 10—12 months |
| Cheese, hard | 6 months | 6 months |
| Cheese, sliced | 1—2 months | Doesn’t freeze well |
| Chicken parts | 1—2 days | 9 months |
| Citrus fruits | 1 – 2 weeks | Do not freeze |
| Cookie dough | Use by date | 2 months |
| Ham, canned | 1 week | 3—4 months |
| Ham, whole | 1 week | 1—2 months |
| Hot dogs | 2 weeks | 1—2 months |
| Juice | 3 weeks | 8—12 months |
| Lunch meat | 2 weeks | 1 month |
| Peas | 1—2 days | 8 months |
| Pork chops | 2—3 days | 4—6 months |
| Tortillas | 4—7 days | 4 months |
| Venison steak | 3—5 days | 9—12 months |
| Yogurt | 2 weeks | 1—2 months |

**Nonperishable Foods**

Unopened shelf-stable foods can be stored at room temperature (ideally, 50 – 70 degrees) and safely eaten according to the following chart:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Product** | **Past Date in Pantry** |
| Beans, dried | 12 months |
| Canned goods, low acid (such as meat, poultry, soups, beans, carrots, corn, pasta) | 2—5 years |
| Canned goods, high acid (such as juice, fruit, pickles, tomato soup) | 12—18 months |
| Cereal | 6—12 months |
| Gravy, jars & cans | 2—5 years |
| Jams, jellies | 12 months |
| Ketchup | 12 months |
| Mayonnaise | 2—3 months |
| Pasta; Egg noodles | 2 years |
| Peanut butter | 6—9 months |
| Salsa | 12 months |
| Tomato sauce | 2 years |

\*If you plan to freeze food that was refrigerated when you received it, place it in the freezer immediately. Cook vegetables before freezing.

Source: Food Marketing Institute; Cornell University Institute of Food Science; Virginia Cooperative Extension