

FACT SHEET • Ohio Department of Agriculture

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Fresh Meat and Poultry Dating - Slightly Revised (01/29/04)

What are the federal food dating requirements?

Under federal regulations, all infant formula, baby food, and over the counter drugs sold in the United States are required to have product dating, no matter where they are sold. This is the only universally accepted system used for the dating of food products across the United States.

What type of dating should we expect to see?

"Open" dating, which uses a calendar date as opposed to a code, is the stamping of a date on a food product's package to help the store determine how long to display the product for sale. It can also help the purchaser know the time limit to purchase or use the product at its best quality. Although it is a helpful gauge of quality for consumers, it does not necessarily tell the consumer whether the food is safe to eat. Open dating is found primarily on perishable foods.

There are three basic types of open dates: (1) "Use-by" date, the last date *recommended for consumer use* of the product while at peak quality. The date is determined by the packer of the product. (2) "Sell-by" date *identifies to the store management* how long a product should be displayed for sale. (3) "Best if used by (or before)" date is *useful to the consumer* to predict for best flavor or quality, although it is technically not a "sell-by" or safety date.

Is food safety considered compromised after a meat or poultry product date expires?

Product dates do not cover an important strategy to ensure wholesomeness proper home storage and preparation after purchase. Even if a "use-by" date expires during home storage, a product can be safe, wholesome, and of good quality if it is handled properly and properly refrigerated (41° F or below). On the other hand, improperly handled foods can lead to spoilage or even foodborne illness **even if the product date has not passed**. If foods that require refrigeration are mishandled such as by storage at unsafe temperatures (between 41°F and 140° F), spoilage or foodborne illnesses may occur regardless of the date stamped on the package. For example, if hot dogs are taken to a picnic and left out of refrigeration for several hours, they would likely be unsafe to eat, even if the package date has not passed.

What are the dating requirements for meat and poultry?

Although meat products are not required to bear a date on their label, most retailers date their meat products for the purposes of product rotation and evaluation of quality. Poultry products on the other hand, are required to bear a date. A retailer may legally sell fresh or processed meat and poultry products beyond the date on the package as long as the product appears of good quality. It is also legitimate for a retailer to evaluate a meat or poultry product for quality and update (i.e. change) a date on fresh meat or poultry that has been cut up and wrapped in the meat department of the retail store. Meat retailers can also repackage meat and poultry received from other companies, if they repackage them with their own retail label. If a meat or poultry product has a date that has passed and the food remains of good quality, the meat or poultry product may continue to be offered for sale. The date cannot be changed without rewrapping the meat or poultry product. It is not legal to modify a label on a meat or poultry product packaged under federal inspection without removing the federal legend. All food products must be "honestly presented" with no attempt to deceive the consumer.

What can the consumer do to ensure the quality of the foods they buy?

There are six common-sense things consumers can do to protect themselves when buying fresh meat and poultry:

- (1) Purchase the product before the package quality date expires.
- (2) Carefully examine discounted meat and poultry products.
- (3) Meat and poultry products should be taken home immediately after purchase and refrigerated promptly.
- (4) Verify with a thermometer that home refrigeration is kept at least at 41° F.
- (5) Meat and poultry products should be frozen if you cannot use them within a couple of days of purchase.
- (6) Follow the proper safe food handling recommendations on the labels of meat and poultry.