



Shelf Life of Food Bank Products

Marion Polk Food Share often distributes food items after the date on the package. Food manufacturers use different date codes to ensure that consumers receive their product at peak quality. Once a product is past code date, many manufacturers donate it to food banks. Food Share staff monitor this food to ensure that the quality remains good. **This food is still safe to eat!**

This guide explains “shelf life”, or how long a food is good past its code date.

Dates: What do the Dates on Food Packages and Medicines Mean?

The only foods that are required by federal law to have expiration dates are baby food, infant formula, and over-the-counter medications. No medicines should be distributed after the expiration date. The Food Share does not distribute most baby food past its expiration date. However, some products designed for babies such as juice and cookies or biscuits can be distributed past their date and are safe to eat.

Many canned and boxed products are safe to eat long after the date on the container, and the shelf life of refrigerated and frozen foods can be extended if they are handled properly. Once a perishable item is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires-- foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely, though the quality slowly deteriorates over time. Here are some code dates you may see on food packages:

“Expiration Date” (Examples: “Expires 2/15/06” or “Do not use after 7/9/05”)

- Look for it on:** Baby food and formula, medicines, vitamins, yeast, baking powder.
- What it means:** Do not distribute infant formula, vitamins, or medicines after the expiration date! Yeast and baking powder work less well after expiration but are safe to eat.

“Pack Date” (Examples: “Packed on 9/23/05” or “192 VIG 2109”)

- Look for it on:** Canned food, crackers, cookies, spices.
- What it means:** This is the date the food was packaged. A code is often used that cannot be understood by the general public. Usually this food is of good quality and safe to eat a long time past the date.

“Sell By” Date (Example: “Sell by May 16, 2005”. Also called Pull Date)

- Look for it on:** Refrigerated foods such as milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, eggs, lunch meat, packaged salad mixes.
- What it means:** The store must sell these foods before the code date listed and often donates these foods when they are close to date. If the food has been handled properly it is still safe to eat and the quality is good. Food bank staff monitor this food to ensure that the quality remains good.

“Use By” or Quality Date (Examples: “Best if used by 3/1/05” or “Use Before 5/15/05”)

- Look for it on:** Crackers, cookies, cold cereals, and other dry, shelf stable food.
- What it means:** This date is the manufacturer’s recommendation for how long the food will be at peak quality. After the quality date, the food is still safe to eat but slowly begins to lose nutrients and the quality begins to lessen.

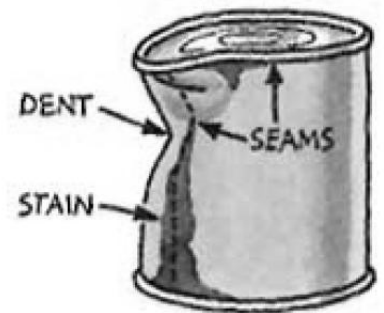
Shelf-Stable Product

Most shelf-stable or ‘dry’ foods (cans, boxes, bags, etc.) remain edible from several days, months or even years past their code date. Check the date on the label and use the chart on the next page to see if the food is still good to distribute.

Always examine the packaging to make sure it has not been damaged too much so that the food is no longer safe to eat.

Do Not Consume Food from Cans or Jars If:

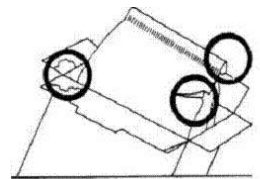
- Leaking or stained
- Swollen can
- Rusty
- Badly dented, crimped or pinched
- Container is cracked
- Foul odor
- Safety seals are broken or missing
- Lids are loose or missing
- Foods exhibit changed color or odor—**never taste suspicious foods!**



Do Not Consume Food from Boxes If:

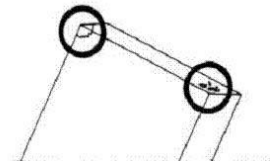
Inside bag:

- Is torn or leaking
- Has moldy or foreign objects inside
- Seals are ripped



Box without an inside bag:

- Is open or torn
- Has live or dead insects, webs, or droppings
- Is stained or wet



Tips on Storing Canned and Boxed Food:

- ✓ Store cans and boxes off the floor, either on a pallet or shelf and 18 inches away from the wall so air can circulate.
- ✓ Store canned and boxed goods in a clean, dry, and cool area (below 85°F).
- ✓ Extremely hot (over 100°F) and cold (below 30°F) temperatures can damage canned goods and shorten shelf life.
- ✓ Always rotate your stock—First in, First out! Distribute or use older products before newer ones.

This chart tells you how long a specific food can be eaten after its code date. **If you have a question on a food that is not on the list, call the Food Share for more information: (503) 581-1152 and ask for Agency Relations**

Shelf Stable Product	Shelf Life after Code Date
Baby Food	
Food in jars or cans	Expiration Date
Cereal: dry mixes	Expiration Date
Formula	Expiration Date
Juice	1 year
Beverages	
Coffee: instant, ground	2 years
whole bean	1 year
Coffee Creamer: powder	2 years
liquid	9 months
Instant Breakfast	6 months
Nutritional aid supplements	1 year
Juice and juice concentrate	1 year
Milk: shelf stable UHT	1 year
non-fat dry	18 months
evaporated and/or condensed	1 year
soy or rice milk, shelf stable	3 months
Seltzer or club soda	6 months
Soda: regular and diet	6 months regular, 3 months diet
Tea: instant	2 years
bags	18 months
Flavored Water	18 months
Water	3 years
Bread and Grain Products	
Bread, including rolls, commercial	7 days
Baking mixes: bread, brownie, cake, muffin, pudding	1 year
Cakes: prepared	4 days
Cereal: ready-to-eat	1 year
cook before eating	6 months
Cookies: packaged	2 months
Toaster Pastries	6 months fruit filled, 9 months other
Flour: cake or all purpose	1 year
whole wheat and other whole grain flours	6 months
Macaroni and cheese	2 years
Pancake mix	6 months

Popcorn	2 years
Potatoes: instant	1 year
Pasta: dry, without egg	2 years
dry, with egg	2 years
Rice: white	2 years
brown	1 year
Rice or pasta meals (ex: skillet dinners)	18 months
Sugar: white	2 years
brown, light and dark, powdered	18 months

Shelf Stable Product	Shelf Life after Code Date
Canned Foods	
Beans: all types	5 years
Frosting: canned	10 months
Low acid foods such as: o gravy, pasta, stews, cream sauces o soup and soup broth that is not tomato based, o peas, carrots, corn, potatoes, greens, and spinach	5 years
High acid foods such as: o fruit including applesauce, juices o pickles, sauerkraut, baked beans w/mustard, vinegar o tomatoes, tomato soup, tomato-based pasta sauces	18 months
Meat: beef, chicken, pork, turkey	3 years
Fish: salmon, tuna, sardines	3 years
Pie filling	3 years
Condiments	
Barbecue sauce: bottled	1 year
Gravy: dry mixes	2 years
Jams, jellies, preserves	1 year
Ketchup, cocktail or chili sauce: jar, bottle or packet	1 year
Mayonnaise: jar, bottle or packet	3 months
Molasses	2 years
Mustard: jar, bottle or packet	2 years
Olives	1 year
Pickles	1 year
Salad dressings: bottled	1 year
Salsa: bottled	1 year
Syrup	1 year
Worcestershire sauce	1 year
Miscellaneous	
Beans, dried	12 months
Bouillon: beef and chicken	12 months
Candy: chocolate and all candy	2 years
Crackers, pretzels, potato chips	6 months
Nuts: shelled	4 months
unshelled	6 months
Oil: olive, vegetable, cooking or salad	6 months
Vegetable shortening	3 months
Peanut butter	9 months

Shelf stable pudding, jello	2 months
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Cooler and Freezer Product

Chilling and freezing keeps food fresh longer, and many foods are safe to eat past their code date. **All frozen meat that you receive from the Food Share is frozen before the use-by date and is safe to eat!**

Chilled and frozen food must be stored at the proper temperature until distributed:

- Cooler or refrigerator: 41° F or below
- Freezer: 0° F or below

Cooler or Freezer Product	When to Throw Out after Sell-By Date	
	Refrigerator (41°F or below)	Freezer (0°F or below)
Dairy		
Butter	3 months	9 months
Cheese: hard	6 months	6 months
Cheese Trays	1 week	Do not freeze
soft	1 week	Do not freeze
Cottage cheese	2 weeks	Do not freeze
Cream cheese	2 weeks	Do not freeze
Cream: half & half	3-4 days	4 months
Cream: heavy	10 days	Do not freeze
Dips made with sour cream	2 weeks	Do not freeze
Eggs, in shell	5 weeks	Do not freeze
Ice cream and ice cream bars	n /a	6 months
Margarine	6 months	12 months
Milk	1 week	1 month
Pudding	1 month	Do not freeze
Sour cream	2 weeks	Do not freeze
Yogurt	2 weeks	2 months
Whipped cream, real or aerosol can	4 weeks	Do not freeze
Whipped topping, non-dairy	3 months	Do not freeze
Fish/Seafood, uncooked	Do not thaw and refreeze.	
Lean fish: cod, flounder, sole, haddock, Pollock	2 days	8 months
Fatty fish: salmon, mackerel, perch	2 days	3 months
Shrimp and other shellfish	2 days	6 months
Juice Concentrates		
Juice concentrates: all types	10 days	1 year
Meats, uncooked, raw	Do not thaw and refreeze.	
Beef, lamb, pork, steaks, chops, or roasts	5 days	1 year
Chicken and turkey	2 days	9 months
Ground meat (beef, turkey, chicken.)	2 days	4 months
Meat, Processed		
Hot dogs	2 weeks	6 months
Luncheon meats	2 weeks	6 months

Bacon	1 week	1 month
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Cooler or Freezer Product	When to Throw Out after Sell-By Date	
	Refrigerator (41°F or below)	Freezer (0°F or below)
Meat Processed (cont.)		
Sausage: raw	2 days	2 months
smoked links, patties	1 week	2 months
Pepperoni	3 weeks	2 months
Chicken nuggets or patties	2 days	3 months
Fried chicken	4 days	4 months
Deli Foods		
Main dishes or meals	4 days	3 months
Meats in gravy or broth	2 days	6 months
Salads: prepared (ex: macaroni, egg)	4 days	Do not freeze
Spinach or salad, bagged	Expiration date	Do not freeze
Side dishes: cooked vegetables, rice, potatoes	4 days	2 months
Fruit: cut	Sell By Date	Do not freeze
Miscellaneous		
Tube cans of biscuits, rolls, pizza dough	Sell By Date	Do not freeze
Cartons of juice, lemonade	10 days	6 months USDA
Frozen vegetables	n/a	8 months
Ready-to-bake pie crust or pizza crust	Sell By Date	2 months
Frozen fruits such as berries, melons	n/a	4 months
Cookie dough	Sell By Date	2 months
Frozen TV dinners	n/a	6 months
Tofu	Sell By Date	Do not freeze
Soy meat substitutes (ex: meatless hot dogs, meatless burgers)	Sell By Date	18 months

Store refrigerated and frozen food properly to help it maintain its quality longer.

Tips on Storing Refrigerated Food:

- ✓ Leave meat, poultry, and seafood in the original packaging before distributing. It is unsafe to open and repack these foods.
- ✓ Keep all chilled food refrigerated until distribution.
- ✓ Store eggs in their original carton.

Tips on Storing Frozen Food:

- ✓ Keep the freezer temperature at 0° F or below.

Tips on Storing Fresh Produce:

- ✓ Most fruits and vegetables have the best quality when kept refrigerated.
- ✓ Some items like onions and potatoes can be stored outside the cooler.
- ✓ Tomatoes taste best if not refrigerated.



Sources:

Note—For internet sources, the dates listed are dates that websites were accessed, not original dates of publication.

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- 5 *For Consumers: Food Storage Information*. Food Marketing Institute. 12 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.fmi.org/consumer/foodkeeper/brochure.cfm>>.
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- 1 *Recommended Food Storage Times Cold and Dry Refrigerated and Frozen Foods*. UK Cooperative Extension Service. 12 Oct. 2010. <<http://ces.ca.uky.edu/oldham-files/FN-SSB.085.pdf>>.
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