



K-State Extension Connection

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Food Product Dating...Addressing the Confusion

The subject of food product dating came up in my last column regarding Food Waste, and has come up in several conversations with consumers in the last few weeks. So, I decided to share a bit of information to help clear up some of the misunderstanding surrounding these dates.

The printed dates on our food products can often spark confusion at the grocery store and at home. The confusion can come with terms such as “sell-by” or “use-by” among others. Understanding these terms is important when you’re trying to reduce food waste and save money. The following terms will help you make choices about what to buy and how long to keep it.

- **Sell-By:** The sell-by date is determined by the food product manufacturer and is often found on perishable items like meat, seafood, poultry, and milk. It informs the store of how long the product should be on display. You should buy a product before the sell-by date. You can still store the item at home beyond that date, as long as you follow safe storage procedures. For example, milk will generally be safe to drink one week after the “sell-by” date on the package, assuming it has been continuously refrigerated at or below 40°F. K-State offers a Refrigerator and Freezer Storage Chart at <https://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3130.pdf> which can help you determine how long to keep meat, seafood, poultry and eggs as well as most other refrigerated or frozen products.
- **Use-By, Best if Used By, Best By, Best Before:** These “use-by” and “best” dates are generally found on shelf-stable products such as ketchup, salad dressings, and peanut butter. The date, which is provided by the manufacturer, tells you how long the product is likely to remain at its absolute best quality when unopened. It is not a safety date. Examine the product to gauge the quality after the date and discard foods that have developed an off odor, flavor, or appearance.

- **Expires on:** The only place you're likely to see this is on baby formula and some baby foods, which are the only food products the federal government regulates with regard to dating. Always use the product before this expiration date has passed for safety reasons.
- **Stamped Dates on Packages:** Products like bagged salad greens, bread, and pre-cut vegetables often feature a date stamped on the package. This date is 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 a product at its best quality

A better understanding of these terms will not only help reduce food waste, which is a prevalent problem in the United States; it can also help families save money and help them to avoid throwing away tomorrow's dinner. To learn more about how to maximize the freshness of your food, visit <https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/foodkeeperapp/index.html> or download the FoodKeeper App to learn how to keep your items fresher for longer.

Find more information about these topics and others, by contacting the Wildcat Extension District offices at: Crawford County, 620-724-8233; Labette County, 620-784-5337; Montgomery County, 620-331-2690; Wilson County, 620-378-2167; Pittsburg Office, Expanded Food and Nutrition Education (EFNEP), 620-232-1930. Wildcat District Extension is on the Web at <http://www.wildcatdistrict.ksu.edu>. Or, like our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/wildcat.extension.district.

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