

FOOD BANK

OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

Decoding Food Expiration and Sell-By Dates

Food dates are NOT for safety. Instead, they are dates put on by the manufacturer to help the seller determine how long to keep the product on display. The concern is for quality, not safety. The only exception is baby formula, medications and nutritional supplements, which lose their nutritional value after the date. The following information should help you determine when to keep food and when it should go:

Date	Examples	May be found on	What it means	When to dispose
Expiration Date	"Expires 12/15/15" "Do not use after 7/7/15"	Baby food Baby formula Nutritional supplements Medicine Vitamins	The manufacturer cannot guarantee the nutritional value of the product after this date	Dispose of product on expiration date
Pack Date	"Packed on 4/8/13" Can also be a string of numbers like "22:5306412"	Canned Foods Crackers Cookies Spices	This is the date the food was packaged. Purpose is to assist retailer with arranging foods on shelves.	Has a very long shelf life. See product chart below. Food does not need to be thrown out on this date!
Use by Date	"Best if used by 5/14/15" "Use before 8/9/15"	Crackers Cookies Cereal Soda Salad Mixes Beverages	This is the manufacturer's recommendation for when the food will be at peak quality.	Food does not need to be thrown out on this date! See product chart below.
Sell by Date	"Sell by 5/12/16" "Pull date 5/12/16"	Milk Yogurt Cheeses Eggs Lunch Meats	The store must sell foods before the date listed, and may donate the foods when they are close to date.	If food has been handled properly, and quality is still good, then it is safe to eat!

DAIRY

With dairy, your nose is a good indicator- if smells bad, it should go. If you aren't sure about eggs, try the float test, which is usually (but not always) accurate: if an egg is still good to eat, it will sink to the bottom of a cup of water. If it floats, get rid of it. Yogurt is safe unless you see mold. Hard cheeses last longer than soft cheese, and if you see mold, just cut it out. If soft or shredded cheeses get moldy, throw them away. The length of fridge and freezer life below assumes the product has not been open and has been kept at the proper temperature.

FOOD	FRIDGE LIFE AFTER DATE	FREEZER LIFE AFTER DATE
Cheeses	Processed (American) cheese: 30 days Shredded: 30 days Hard (cheddar, parmesan): 6 months Pre-sliced: 14 days	6 months
Margarine	6 months	1 year
Yogurt	14 days	1-2 months
Butter	2 months	1 year
Milk	5 days	Not recommended
Eggs	28 days	Not recommended

Meat

"Meat Rescue" means that the meat was frozen by the grocery store before it reached expiration date.

FOOD	FRIDGE LIFE AFTER DATE	FREEZER LIFE AFTER DATE
Poultry	2 days	9-12 months
Beef	Ground: 2 days Steak: 3-5 days	9-12 months
Pork	Ground: 2 days Chop: 3-5 days	9-12 months

DO NOT REFREEZE THIS MEAT. DEFROST IN YOUR REFRIGERATOR AND COOK IMMEDIATELY; DO NOT LEAVE OUT ON YOUR COUNTER TO DEFROST.

CANNED FOOD

Cans last a long time, but be sure to use older cans before newer ones. Do not consume cans that are leaking, swollen, rusty, or very badly dented.

FOOD	SHELF LIFE AFTER CODE DATE
Beans	3 years
Fish: tuna, salmon, sardines	3 years
Fruit and tomato based products	1-2 years
Soups and vegetables	2-3 years
Meat	2-3 years

CONDIMENTS AND SAUCES

FOOD	SHELF LIFE AFTER CODE DATE
BBQ Sauce	1 year
Honey	Forever
Jam, jelly, preserves	18 months
Ketchup	18 months
Bottled salad dressing	1 year
Salsa	18 months
Spaghetti sauce (can or jar)	18 months

BEVERAGES

FOOD	SHELF LIFE AFTER CODE DATE
Cocoa Mix	36 months
Instant Coffee	2 years
Powdered Creamer	2 years
Boxed Juice	4-6 months
Evaporated/Condensed Milk	1 year

DRY GOODS

FOOD	SHELF LIFE AFTER OPENING	EXTENSION**
Pancake mix	9 months	5 years properly room temp
Dry beans	1 year	30 years properly stored
Bouillon	1-2 years	5 years properly room temp
Bread	3-5 days	3 months frozen
Cereals (cold)	1 year	1-2 years room temp
Dried fruit	6 months	5 years room temp
Macaroni and cheese	1 year	
Nuts	1 year	
Oatmeal (quick or regular)	1 year	30 years room temp
Oils	6 months	
Pasta	2-3 years	30 years room temp
Peanut butter	18 months	4 years room temp
Instant potatoes	1 year	7 years room temp
Rice	White rice: 2 years Brown rice: 1 year	30 years room temp 5 years frozen
Spices	2 years	Lose flavor but safe
Toaster pastries	6 months	
Tortillas	3 months	6 months frozen

**Extension: this is how long products can be kept in ideal circumstances- unopened, in airtight containers, at room temperature or frozen.

Adapted by Food Bank of Western Massachusetts from foodshare.org