

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH FACT SHEET

No. 215

FOOD SAFETY - BEST BEFORE VERSUS USE BY DATES

All pre-packaged food that is expected to stay in premium condition for two years or less must be date marked. Date marks are stamped, printed or embossed on packages as **advice** to the consumer.

They give two types of information - how long the food, if properly stored, should retain maximum quality and/or when it was packed.

DATE MARKS ARE ADVICE, NOT MAGIC

The food does not automatically go bad once its stated peak period has passed - and the date marks cannot stop it going bad if it is stored the wrong way.

USE BY OR BEST BEFORE - WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Foods with a shelf life of less than two years must have a '**best before**' date. It may still be safe to eat those foods after the best before date but they may have lost quality and some nutrition.

Foods that must be consumed before a certain date for health and safety reasons must have a '**use by**' date. These foods should NOT be sold or consumed after this date. An exception is bread, which can be labelled with a '**baked on**' date if its shelf life is less than seven days.

IT IS NOT ILLEGAL TO SELL FOOD THAT IS PAST ITS BEST BEFORE DATE.

In Australia food can still be sold after its best-before date, but it is illegal to sell food that is not of the nature, substance or quality demanded by the person purchasing the food. If out of date foods are sold, they must not be damaged, deteriorated or perished and to do so would be an offence according to the NT Food Act.

Food business operators often reduce the prices of out of date or short dated stock. This is a voluntary gesture and is not required by law. However, an appropriate sign should be displayed to ensure that the customer is aware that the food is out of date. It is illegal to tamper with date marking on food labels.

Check the date stamps on packaged food labels before you buy. It is best to buy food well within its use by date as. Use the date marking as a rough guide, but bear in mind that perishable items in particular may spoil before that date if not stored properly.

FOODS NEED PROPER STORAGE

Whether or not a product keeps fresh and edible right up to the use-by or 'best before' date depends on how it is stored. Many foods need to be kept at certain temperatures, either in the fridge or freezer. For instance, fresh milk needs to be refrigerated. If a carton of milk is left out on the kitchen bench, it will quickly sour, regardless of its 'best before' date.

CHECK THE PACKAGING

Foods can become spoiled well before their use-by or 'best before' date, either because their packaging has been damaged or they weren't stored properly at the supermarket. When buying foods, check for dents, leaks and tears in the packaging. If you can see any sign of damage, don't buy the product, as it might be contaminated with bacteria. Many products, such as dairy foods, need to be kept at a low temperature to avoid spoilage. Don't buy any foods that need to be chilled or frozen if they are sitting on unrefrigerated shelves, or stacked in overfilled fridges.

MANUFACTURERS ERR ON THE SIDE OF CAUTION

Manufacturers usually choose a 'best before' date well before the time when the food would be expected to deteriorate and spoil. A conservative 'best before' date is designed to encourage you to eat the product while it is fresh and at its best, so you should consider 'best before' dates as a guide only. Frozen and canned products, in particular, tend to keep their quality for some time after the 'best before' date has expired. Within reason, provided the food looks and smells as you would expect, it should be safe to eat, even if the 'best before' date has passed.

WHERE TO GET HELP

- Australia New Zealand Food Authority Tel. (02) 6271 2222.
- Australian Consumers' Association Tel. (02) 9577 3333.
- Food Safety Information Council Tel. 1800 647 284.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- 'Best before' dates give you an idea of how long foods will last before they lose quality.
- Most products will last beyond their 'best before' date if they are stored properly.
- Foods marked with a use-by date must be consumed before that date.

For more information contact your local Environmental Health Office.

Contact details can be found at

http://www.health.nt.gov.au/Environmental_Health/Contact_us/index.aspx