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Food Safety:
What is an
Expiration
Date?

Did you know that the only foods that are required by federal law to have expiration dates are baby food, infant and baby formula?

In fact, an actual expiration date is only used on baby formula, baby food, yeast and baking powder.

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 11/15/13” or “Do not use after 11/15/13”)

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

“Sell By” Date (Example: “Sell by January 1, 2012”. 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 monitors this food to ensure that the quality remains good.

“Use By” or Quality Date (Examples: “Best if used by 1/1/12” or “Use Before 1/1/12”)

- **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.

“Pack Date” (Examples: “Packed on 03/01/2012” or “22:5306412” or “KL064”)

- **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, often numbering days sequentially such that January 1 is day 001 and December 31 is day 365 (366 in leap years). Usually this food is of good quality and safe to eat for a long time past the date.