



# New Year...Out with the Old...How Do You Know? ...For Real

**H**appy 2018 everyone! A lot of you might be already well into (or already failing with!) your New Year's resolutions. For many, that includes new year cleaning and getting rid of clutter — “out with the old” — from your fridge and cupboards.

How do you know what to throw away? Even when purchasing your food, how long do you have before you can no longer use it? It's hard to know with so many options on the packaging. What do those expiration dates really mean anyway?

## On the seventh day

The FDA says if you prepare foods onsite in a food establishment, your expiration date is on the 7th day — with the date of preparation counting as day ONE. So, for example, if today is the 14th of a month, when is the expiration date? Most of our students answer, “The 21st!” Sounds logical doesn't it? Seven days later — simple addition. Actually, the expiration date is not the 21st — it's the 20th. You have to count day one, the 14th, and then count forward till the 7th day. So day 1 (14th), day 2 (15th), day 3 (16th), day 4 (17th), day 5 (18th), day 6 (19th), day 7 — throw away date — (20th)...NOT the 21st. FDA recommendations, of course, are set as outside limits to avoid the possibility of foodborne illness.

Most food establishments don't serve seven-day-old food to their customers. Even though it may be biologically safe, it won't be so pretty quality-wise. In fact, most food establishments don't serve food past three days of the preparation date for this very reason. They want repeat business by serving their guests aesthetically pretty food.

## When a date is not a date

There can be a lot of confusion about the shelf life of a product when purchasing food from a distributor or a supermarket. When should we throw a product away? What's the difference in the various dates: “Best by,” “Use by,” “Sell by,” “Expiration date.”

With the exception of infant formula, product dating is not required by federal regulations.



## What does it all mean?

**BEST IF USED BY/BEFORE** date indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or a safety date.

- **SELL BY** date tells the store how long to display the product for sale for inventory management. It is not a safety date.
- **USE BY** date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date except for when used on infant formula.
- **EXPIRATION** date is a safety date. It indicates when bacteria present on food may grow to an unsafe level and cause illness.

Food manufacturers frequently use phrases such as “Sell-by” and “Use-by” on product labels to describe quality dates, and it is on a voluntary basis. Expiration dates on food are not required by federal law, although some states require such dates on meat, eggs, or milk. As a food product passes its “expiration” date, it may get stale, and some products, such as milk, may go sour. But according to food safety experts, most spoiled

foods, though unpalatable, aren't necessarily hazardous.

## Confusion = food waste

The use of different phrases to describe quality dates leads to confusion and has led to a lot of unnecessary food wastage. Consumers and retailers often dispose of food that is otherwise wholesome and safe because it is past the date printed on the package. The USDA estimates food loss and wastage at 30 percent of the food supply at the retail and consumer levels. To reduce consumer confusion and wasted food, the Food Safety and Inspection Service recommends that food manufacturers and retailers that apply product dating use a “Best if used by” date. Research shows that this phrase conveys to consumers that the product will be of best quality if used by the calendar date shown. Foods not exhibiting signs of spoilage should be wholesome and may be sold, purchased, donated, and consumed beyond the labeled “Best if used by” date.

Does this mean you can keep food past a use or sell by date in your operation? Not really. This is what FIFO, first in first out, is for. Proper stock rotation will ensure that your oldest products are used first, and you will not have product on your shelves past the date marked on the packaging. And would you really want to serve food that is not top quality to your customers? Probably not a good business decision for repeat business hopes.

To help keep that clean-out resolution at home? FIFO works there, too. Put new products at the back and older goods in front where it will be used first, avoiding potential confusion about the expiration dates before the dates even occur!

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