

MAKING SENSE OF DATE LABELS ON FOOD

Confusion over date labels on food can cause consumers to throw away food prematurely. In the United States, “sell by” and “use by” dates are not federally regulated and do not necessarily indicate food safety, except on certain baby foods or infant formula. Rather, they are manufacturer suggestions for peak quality. Most foods can be safely consumed well after their use-by dates. Understanding the true meaning of use by and sell by dates and being okay consuming foods that aren’t quite perfect can help reduce food waste.

Outcome

Participants will learn about food product dating labels such as “sell by” and “use by” to make informed choices about food.

Audience

Adults

Time

30 - 45 minutes

Concepts

- Use by and sell by dates on food labels don’t necessarily indicate food safety. They are often manufacturer suggestions for peak quality.
- Understanding date labels can help you reduce the amount of still-good food you throw away.

Supplies

- Food products that contain different date labels. Ideas include dry pasta, canned salsa or vegetables, bread, produce or cheese.



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Preparation

- Collect food containers in advance.
- Review the date-label terms and definitions below before the activity to be well-versed on what the terms mean.

Procedure

- Explain what each date label means. Give participants time to ask questions about each date label.
- Have participants take an inventory of the dates on some of the food in their households. Ask them to choose foods stored in a variety of locations, such as in the cupboard, in the fridge, in the freezer, etc.
- Have participants record the dates on the food product and then think about how they would know if the food was safe to eat beyond looking at the date label, such as smelling the food first or looking for signs of freshness.
- Have participants discuss their findings and what they will do differently as a result.

Dates meant for businesses to communicate with each other:

- “Production” or “pack date”: the date on which the food product was manufactured or placed in its final packaging.
- “Sell by” date: the manufacturer’s suggestion for when the grocery store should no longer sell the product. This information helps stores with their stock rotation. The “sell by” date is often misinterpreted to mean a product is unsafe to eat, but in fact, “sell by” dates are typically designed as a way for the manufacturer to ensure the grocery store that if a product is sold by that date, it will still be of good quality for a reasonable amount of time after it’s purchased.

Dates meant to communicate directly with the consumer:

As explained by the FDA, “use by,” “best by,” “best if used before,” and “guaranteed fresh until” dates are typically manufacturer suggestions for peak quality. These are loosely used to mean:

- “Best if used before” or “best by” date: the manufacturer’s estimate of a date after which food will no longer be at its highest quality.
- “Use by” date: also typically a manufacturer’s estimate of the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality.
- “Freeze by” date: a guide for consumers to know by when to freeze a product. This date is often used in conjunction with another date, in case the consumer chooses not to freeze the product.

Discussion questions

- How has your understanding of food date labels changed? What changes could be made to help consumers better understand food labels?
- Can you think of a food item that you have thrown away recently based on the belief that the food was unsafe to eat/no longer fresh?
- What do you want to learn more about?

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Additional activity ideas

- **Grocery store label search**

Go to the grocery store as a group and split into groups. Visit the different areas of the store to look at the types of date labels commonly found on items such as fresh packaged deli food, packaged produce, canned foods, frozen foods, dairy products, baby food, pet food, and household cleaners. Each team should write down the number of different date labels they find, and then compare their list with the other teams. Review what the different date labels mean.

- **Watch and discuss “Inglorious Fruits and Vegetables”**

Intermarche, France’s third-largest supermarket chain, began a campaign called “Inglorious Fruits and Vegetables” in 2014 to try to change consumer attitudes about ugly-looking produce. View

Intermarche’s campaign video at www.vimeo.com/98441820 and discuss the campaign with participants. Was the campaign successful? Why or why not? What strategies can you use to know when fruits and vegetables are still edible and when they should be thrown out? What can you do with produce that might be overripe? (Example: use them for baking in dressings, soups or in a juice or smoothie)

- **Tell a friend**

Commit to telling one friend, family member, neighbor or co-worker about label dates and what they mean. Ask if they tend to throw away food because of the date labels, and encourage them to learn more about what labels really mean.