

From: tenzicut

"How long will this keep?" This is the defining question of food storage. Everything you will read in this work evolves from this central question. The length of time a particular food will remain palatable and nutritious in storage determines its usefulness for our purposes. The fact of the matter is that there are few hard and clear answers. As a result it is not uncommon to find two or more sources who purport to know, but that give conflicting data. The following will hopefully cut through some of the fog.

A. "BEST USED", "USE BY" AND OTHER FOOD PRODUCT DATES

Although there are some twenty States in the U.S. that have food product dating laws the Federal government has little regulation concerning food product dating except for infant formulas and some baby foods. It does, however, require that if a manufacturer puts a calendar date on a food product it must also put wording to the effect of "use by" or "best before" next to it to explain what the date means. This is called "open dating" which is to say that it is a plain, easy to read calendar date rather than "closed or coded dating" that must be deciphered. Another date also commonly seen is the "sell by" date. While not as useful for food storage, it does have importance for day-to-day fresh food purchases.

Because the Federal government has so few food product dating standards manufacturers use their own to determine acceptable shelf

lives. For the most part, they are based upon changes in texture, appearance, taste and cooking qualities. When a food item begins to exhibit signs of aging that would make it unappealing to customers then

it is considered to be at the end of its marketable shelf life. Look for statements such as "use by", "best if used by", "best if used before" or similar wording to find this date. For shelf stable and frozen products it must include both the month, day and year. These dates are useful for determining how long a product can be retained in the storage program before it should be rotated out. When a food begins

to undergo taste and appearance degradation the nutrient content will have begun to seriously fade and the time will have come to use it up so

it can be replaced with fresh stock. If the product was properly preserved and not subjected to extreme storage conditions it is not unsafe to use after this date. If there is nothing to replace it with it may be kept, but its palatability and nutritive content will just continue to degrade.

Fresh food items such as meat, milk and eggs use a "sell by" date which simply means that the item should not be purchased beyond that date. Products using this date type are only required to use the day and month. Provided that it was properly transported and stored, an item kept past this date is not unsafe to use, but will begin to exhibit signs of aging that will make it unappealing and should be frozen or consumed shortly thereafter.

NOTE: The shelf life of any food, whether indicated with a "use by" or "sell by" date or found on some chart, is predicated upon assumed storage conditions. If the actual storage conditions are different from the assumed storage conditions then the shelf life will naturally vary. As is explained in *Section I: Time, Temperature,

Moisture, Oxygen and Light*, environmental storage conditions have a major impact on the length of time any foodstuff will remain palatable, nutritious and even whether it will remain safe.

As a general rule, when a shelf life is given, it is for conditions of 70 deg. F in a dark, dry location unless stated otherwise. Be sure to read the fine print on any shelf life chart you may come across to see what its values are predicated upon. There are some floating around giving shelf lives of foods in storage temperatures as low as 40 deg. F. At that temperature you would expect to keep your fresh butter, eggs and milk, but very few have the ability to keep any significant amount of canned goods in so cool a storage area.

Regardless of what the date or chart may indicate, if storage conditions have been very poor then a food will become non-nutritious, unpalatable, perhaps even unsafe to eat even if its listed time is not yet up. An example of this would be keeping egg salad at room temperature for several hours at a picnic. The eggs may have been laid yesterday, but you are taking your chances if you eat it. Never put blind faith in any date. Always keep in mind that they are predicated on unspoken assumptions. IF THE CONTAINER IS BULGING, MOLDED, FOUL SMELLING OR SPEWS LIQUID WHEN OPENED, THROW IT OUT! But throw it out safely so that children and animals cannot get into it.

Please see Section III: Spoilage for further information

B. CLOSED DATING CODES USED BY SOME FOOD MANUFACTURERS.

In spite of the fact that increasing numbers of food processing companies are moving to open dating it is not yet universal. For those products that do not come with a plain "best used by" date it is still possible, albeit with much more difficulty, to determine the rotation period for that specific product.

For a processor to move their product in interstate commerce it must exhibit a packing code. This allows them to easily track their product for purposes of stock rotation and in the event of a recall. These packing codes are usually a series of letters and numbers that indicate dates, times, and sometimes places of manufacture. These dates are not "use by" dates, but the time the container was actually filled. As they are not really intended for general public knowledge these codes are frequently unique to a particular processor and are not commonly published by them.

It is possible to get the keys to these codes by contacting the processor and asking how to decipher the dating code for specific product lines. Over time, readers have been doing this and the code keys below are the ones that have been sent to me. Obviously, they are only a few of the many, many products that use closed dating and I hope that future readers will continue to send these codes in as they are gleaned from the processors.

Frankly, when it comes to the potential dozens of products that would require deciphering their packing codes the entire process is a major nuisance. While it is better to have an encoded date than not

to
have one at all, it would be far better if processors would just use
clear open dating and (best used by) so we wouldn't have to carry a
book
of code keys like covert agents every time we go to the grocery.

Before I list specific manufacturers there is one fairly widely
used code key that may be useful. Some processors use a system where
all the days of the year are listed 1-365 (366 for leap year) as the
first three digits in the code. This number is then followed by a
single letter such as "B" and then by a single digit that represents
the
year.

Some examples of this might be:

Packing code	Date packed
045B97	February 14, 1997
101H98	May 1, 1998
134K96	July 4, 1996
252U98	October 31, 1998

There may be other widely used coding systems yet to be
discovered
and as they become available I will include them in this work.

SPECIFIC PRODUCT LINES:

IMPORTANT NOTE: I have not personally verified all of these code
keys. Also, closed date coding schemes may change
over time. For this reason, the code keys given below may not be

correct. Be sure to check a number of containers in a product line to verify that a particular code key will work with the product line you are interested in.

ARMOUR STAR CANNED MEAT PRODUCTS

Vienna Sausage, Stew, Chili, Deviled Ham, Potted Meat, Slice Dried Beef, Soups, etc. but does NOT include Armour Star Roast Beef or Corned Beef.

The code is on the bottom of the container. The first letter is the month of production; A=January, B=February, C=March and so on. The following two numbers represent the day of the month it was processed and the third number indicates the year.

Example: A code of B148C23 would be B=Feb, 14 = the fourteenth day, 8=1998. B148C23=February 14, 1998 and the last three characters would be plant or processing line locations.

Armour Star Microwaveable Meals have a two line production code on the container lid. The second line is the is date and uses the same code as above.

BERTOLLI OLIVE OIL

Packed two years prior to the use by date on the bottle or can.

BUSH BROTHERS & CO.

Baked beans, chili, etc.

A five digit code on the bottom of the can. The first digit is the month, the next two digits is the day of the month, the next number is the year and the last digit is ignored.

Example: A code of 50173 deciphers to be:

5 = the fifth month or May
01 = the first day of May
7 = 1997
3 = last number is discarded.

Thus 50173 is May 1st, 1997.

CAMPBELL SOUPS:

Best by date on cans. Filled exactly two years prior to that date.

DEL MONTE

Canned fruits, vegetables, etc. I'm not sure if it applies to *all* product lines.

A five character packing code, usually on the bottom. The first character is a digit representing the year. The next three characters are digits representing the day of the year the product was packed. The

last character is a letter and may be ignored.

Example: A packing code of 8045B deciphers to be:

8 = 1998

045 = The 45th day of the year or February 14th.

B = A plant code.

Thus 8045B is February 14th, 1998.

GENERAL MILLS:

The manufacturing date is coded to their fiscal year that begins
on June 1st and ends on May 31st.

Interpret the code as follows:

The first character of the code is a letter and represents the month the product was made.

The second character in the code is a number which represents the year the product was made.

The following two characters are numbers that represent the day of the month the product was made.

The remaining characters following identify plant location and shift information.

Example: A packing code of E731B would translate as follows:

E = October

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7 = 1997

31 = 31st day of the month

B = A plant location

The following is their 12 month cycle. The letter "I" is not used because it can be confused with the number "1".

A = June

E = October

J = February

B = July

F = November

K = March

C = August

G = December

L = April

D = September

H = January

M = May

HANOVER FOODS CORP.

Small whole potatoes, green beans, corn, etc.

A five digit code on the bottom of the can. Omit the first digit.

The next digit is the year. The remaining three digits are the day of the year the product was packed.

Example: A code of 28304 deciphers to be:

2 - discard this number

8 = 1998

304 = the 304th day of the year or October 31st

Thus 28304 is October 31st, 1998

HEALTHY CHOICE:

First character is a number, second is a letter with the

remaining
characters being a lot ID. The number is the year it was packed with
the letter being the month, October = A, November = B, December = C,
January = D, and so on through the year. The recommended shelf life
is
2 years.

HORMEL PRODUCTS

Their packing code is a letter followed by five numbers. The
letter is their plant location and the numbers are the dating code in
a
MM-DD-Y format.

Example: A code of G07048 decodes to mean:

G = plant location
07 = July
04 = The fourth day of the month
8 = 1998

The can was packed July 4, 1998 at plant location G.

JELL-O BRAND PUDDINGS & GELATINS

The first four digits are the date coding. The first digit is
the
year and the following three digits is the day of the year.

Example: A packing code of 804522 10:38 deciphers as:

8 = 1998

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045 = the 45th day of the year or February 14th

22 = discard the last two digits.

10:38 = the time it was packed.

Thus 804522 10:38 means that box of pudding mix was packed on February 14th, 1998 at 10:38 a.m.

MCCORMICK HERBS & SPICES:

(See also <http://www.mccormick.com/info/oftenasked.html>)

There should be a four digit number of the bottom of the spice package or extract bottle. On foil packages, it will be around the outside edge. This code is more complicated than other manufacturers so read closely.

Example: Using a number 3604 as the packing code:

To derive the year, take the first number and add 5 ($3 + 5 = 8$) so 1998 is the year of manufacture.

To derive the month and day, divide the last three digits by 50 ($604 \div 50 = 6$ with 4 remaining). The six indicates the last whole or complete month before the month of production, January, February, March, April, May, and then June. The next month, July, is the production month. The 4 remaining is the day it was produced.

Therefore a packing code of 3604 means that product was packed July 4, 1998.

While not as precise, you can save considerable time by just finding the year. The last three digits representing the day and month will increase as the year grows.

PROGRESSO FOODS

Canned soups, beans, etc.

Two lines of code on top of the can. The top line, the first two characters are the date portion. The first character is a letter indicating the month and the second character is a digit indicating the year.

Example: A packing code of L7N18 1211 (this is the first line) would be:

L = 12th month or December
7 = 1997
N18 = ignored
1211= ignored.

Thus a packing code of L7N18 1211 indicates the can was packed in December of 1997.

C. SHELF LIVES OF SOME COMMON STORAGE FOODS.

The chart given below has been adapted from a number of different shelf-life charts published by the cooperative extension services of several states. It presupposes no special packagings other than the way

the food comes from the store. The general assumption is that when a given foods' taste, appearance or texture begin to take on noticeable changes it has reached the end of its best marketable shelf life and should be rotated out. This is not to say the food is no longer edible, but it is losing nutritional content at the same time so no purpose is served by keeping it for longer than is necessary to replace it with fresher stock. For what it's worth, I'm not fully in agreement with it myself, but it's a good working hypothesis and I modify it by my personal experience which may vary from yours. If it is a dry food then only dry utensils should be used to remove it from its container. The less light, moisture, heat and oxygen it comes into contact with, the longer the food will keep.

All of the below are for new, unopened containers.

FOOD TIPS	RECOMMENDED STORAGE TIME AT 70 deg. F.	STORAGE
Keep the product:		
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Baking powder.....	Till can date.....	Sealed & bone dry
Baking soda.....	2 years.....	Sealed & bone dry
Biscuit, brownie, muffin mix....	9 months.....	Sealed, cool and dry
Bouillon, cubes or granules.....	2 years.....	Sealed, cool and dry
Cake mixes, regular.....	9 months.....	Sealed, cool and dry
angel food.....	1 year.....	Sealed, cool and dry
Canned metal can, non-acidic...	2 years.....	Cool
food, metal can, acidic.....	12-18 months.....	Cool

glass jars.....2-3 years.....Dark and cool
 Chocolate, semi-sweet
 or unsweetened.....18 months.....Cool and dark
 Chocolate syrup.....2 years.....Cool & tightly sealed
 Cocoa, powder or mixes.....8 months.....Sealed and cool
 Coffee, regular.....2 years.....Cool, dry and sealed
 instant.....1-2 years.....Sealed
 Coffee creamers, powdered.....9 months.....Sealed and cool
 Cornmeal.....1 year.....Guard against weevils
 Cornstarch.....18 months.....Dry
 Crackers.....3 months.....Dry
 Flour, white.....8-12 months.....Guard against weevils
 whole wheat.....6-8 months.....Cool and weevil proof
 Frostings, canned.....3 months.....Cool
 mix.....8 months.....Dry and cool
 Fruits, dried.....6-12 months.....Cool & sealed
 Gelatin, all types.....18 months.....Protect from moisture
 Grains, whole.....2 years.....Dry and weevil proof
 Hominy & hominy grits.....1 year.....Guard against weevils
 Honey.....1 year.....Sealed
 Jellies, jams, preserves.....1 year.....Refrigerate after use
 Molasses & syrups.....1 year.....Sealed
 Mayonnaise.....6 months.....Refrigerate after use
 Milk, condensed or
 evaporated.....1 year.....Turn over every 2 mos
 Non-fat dry.....6 months.....Bone dry and cool
 Nuts, vacuum canned.....1 year.....Cool and dark
 other packaging.....3 months.....Cool and dark
 in shell.....4 months.....Cool, dry and dark
 Pancake mix.....6-9 months.....Dry and weevil proof
 Pastas
 (macaroni, noodles, etc).....2 years.....Guard against weevils
 Peanut butter.....6-9 months.....Sealed, cool, dark
 Peas and beans, dry

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(not soybeans).....2 years.....Dry and weevil proof
Potatoes, instant.....6-12 months.....Dry and weevil proof
Pudding mixes.....1 year.....Cool and very dry
Rice, white.....2+ years.....Guard against weevils
 brown.....3-6 months.....Cool and weevil proof
 flavored or herb.....6 months.....Sealed & weevil proof
Salad dressings.....10-12 months.....Refrigerate after use
Salad oils.....6 months.....Sealed, dark and cool
Sauce and gravy mixes.....6-12 months.....Cool and dry
Shortening, solid.....1 year.....Dark
Soup mixes.....1 year.....Cool and dry
Sugar, brown.....6 months.....Airtight container
 confectioners.....18 months.....Dry and sealed
 granulated.....2+years.....Dry
Syrups (corn syrup based).....8-12 months.....Sealed and cool
Tea, bags.....18 months.....Sealed and dry
 instant.....3 years.....Sealed
 loose.....2 years.....Sealed and dry
Vegetables, dried.....1 year.....Cool and sealed
Vinegar.....2+ years.....Sealed
Yeast (dry).....Pkg expiration date....Cool and dry

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