



# FOOD DATING GUIDE

3RD EDITION





# Table of Contents

Understanding Dates on Food Packages and Medicines	4
-----	-----
Shelf-Stable Products	6
-----	-----
Refrigerated Products	10
-----	-----
Frozen Products	12
-----	-----
Fresh Produce	14
-----	-----
Programs at Feeding Westchester	16
-----	-----
Planning a Successful Food Drive	17
-----	-----
Most-Needed Food Drive Items	19





# Navigating Food Dates

## A Guide to Understanding Food Safety

Feeding Westchester frequently receives food items nearing or surpassing their labeled expiration dates. Surprisingly, most of these items remain perfectly safe to consume. Food manufacturers utilize various terms and dating systems to ensure consumers receive products at their peak quality. Even after surpassing these dates, many products maintain their quality and safety, prompting manufacturers to donate them to food banks. To ensure quality remains intact, our staff diligently monitors these items.

This guide aims to clarify the diverse terms and dating methods found on food packages, including "**date codes.**" Additionally, it provides recommendations on the safe consumption period beyond the printed dates, along with insights into Feeding Westchester's services.

Manufacturers assign dates to assist retailers and consumers in determining the optimal quality timeframe, known as food product dating. There are two main types: open dating, which is a calendar date indicating peak quality, and closed dating, often appearing as a series of letters or numbers denoting manufacturing date or time. While there's no official rulebook for closed dating codes, common phrases help decipher them. Understanding these terms empowers consumers to make informed decisions about food safety.

For any queries regarding items not covered in this guide, please contact our registered dietitian nutritionist, Monique Marshall, at 914-418-5208 or via email at [mmarshall@feedingwestchester.org](mailto:mmarshall@feedingwestchester.org). We're committed to promptly determining the safety extension for any questionable products.

Contained within this guide are our best recommendations for the safe consumption period post the printed date. These suggestions are contingent upon optimal storage conditions and absence of damage. *When in doubt, it's best to discard the item.*



# UNDERSTANDING DATES ON FOOD PACKAGES AND MEDICINES

Many food products can be kept past their dates if they are handled properly. Understanding the different terms on food packages can help you decide if a food is still safe to eat. Here are some common date terms explained:



Food manufacturers use different date codes and terms to ensure that consumers receive their product at peak quality.

## Expiration date

The only items required by federal law to have expiration dates are baby formula and medications; do not distribute or consume these items past the expiration date. Some states require eggs to have expiration dates, but they can still be safe to eat 3-5 weeks after their expiration dates.

## Sell-by date

This is the date the stores must sell the food by. The manufacturer takes into account that the item will be stored at home after the sell-by date. Because stores cannot sell products after the sell-by date, they usually donate the foods when they are close to this date. If the foods have been handled properly, they are still safe to eat and the quality is good.

## Use-by date

This date is the manufacturer's recommendation for how long the food will be at peak quality. After the use-by date, the food is still safe to eat but will slowly begin to lose nutrients.



## PACK DATE

This is the date on which the product was packaged. This date is used by manufacturers for tracking purposes. These products have a long shelf life, have good quality, and can be safe to eat past the date (refer to the individual product chart for more detailed references).



## BEST-BY DATE

This date indicates when a product will be at its best level of flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.



## PACKING CODES

These codes enable manufacturers to rotate their stock and locate their products in the event of a recall. Codes appear as a series of letters and/or numbers and refer to the date the product was packed. The codes are not meant for the consumer to interpret them as a “best if used by” date.





# SHELF STABLE PRODUCTS

Shelf stable products are foods that can be stored safely on the shelf, at room temperature. Even though shelf-stable products and dry goods can be safe to eat past their dates, always examine the packaging according to the following guidelines.

## TIPS ON STORING CANNED AND BOXED FOOD:

- Store cans and boxes 6 inches off the floor, either on a pallet or shelf, and 18 inches away from the wall so air can circulate.
- Store canned and boxed goods in a clean, dry, and cool area.
- Extremely hot (over 100° F) and cold (below 30° F) temperatures can damage canned goods and shorten shelf life.
- Always rotate your stock—first in, first out! Distribute or use older products before newer ones.







## **DO NOT CONSUME FOOD FROM CANS, JARS OR BAGS, IF:**

- Leaking or stained
- Swollen
- Rusty
- Badly dented, crimped, or pinched
- Container is cracked or torn
- Releasing a foul odor
- Safety seals are broken or missing
- Lids are loose or missing
- Foods exhibit changed color or odor — *never taste suspicious foods!*

## **DO NOT CONSUME FOOD FROM BOXES IF:**

- Inside bag is torn or leaking
- Moldy or foreign objects are inside
- Seals are ripped



## **DO NOT CONSUME FOOD FROM BOXES WITHOUT AN INSIDE BAG IF:**

- It is open or torn
- Has live or dead insects, webs, or droppings inside
- Is stained or wet





## Shelf-Stable Items

## Shelf Life After Date Code

### Baby Food/Formula

Cereal, food, and formula	Do not consume after expiration date on package
---------------------------	---

### Beverages/Mixes

Carbonated drinks	6 months
Coffee (ground or whole)	1 year
Coffee (instant)	1 year
Coffee creamer, powdered	2 years
Hot chocolate mix	1 year
Juice (bottled or canned)	1 year
Milk (evaporated, condensed, shelf-stable)	1 year
Milk, powdered	3-5 years
Nutrition aid supplements	Do not consume after expiration date on package
Rice milk, soy milk	6 months
Tea	3 years
Water (commercially bottled)	Bottled water can be kept indefinitely however, taste may be impacted by storage conditions. Be sure to store in a cool, dry place, away from direct sunlight and toxic substances

### Canned Foods

#### HIGH ACID FOODS

Fruit (including applesauce, juices)	18 months
Pickles, sauerkraut	18 months
Baked beans w/mustard and vinegar	18 months
Refried beans	18 months
Tomatoes, tomato-based sauces and soups	18 months

#### LOW ACID FOODS

Gravy, soups/broths (non-tomato based)	2-5 years
Pasta, stews	2-5 years
Vegetables (except tomatoes)	2-5 years
Fish and meat	2-5 years



## Shelf-Stable Items

## Shelf Life After Date Code

### Condiments/Sauces/Syrups

Barbeque sauce	1 year
Cream sauces, milk solids	6-12 months
Frosting, tubs	1 year
Honey, molasses, syrups, (chocolate, corn, pancake)	2 years
Jams, jellies, preserves	18 months
Ketchup, cocktail sauce, chilli sauce, salsa	1 year
Mayonnaise	6 months
Mustard	2 years
Olives	1 year
Pickles	1 year
Salad dressings	1 year
Soy sauce, teriyaki sauce	3 years
Vinegar	2 years
Worcestershire sauce	1 year

## Shelf-Stable Items

## Shelf Life After Date Code

### Dry Goods

Baking mixes (cake mix, pancake mix)	1 year
Baking powder	6-18 months, 3-6 months after opening
Baking soda	2-3 years, 6 months after opening
Bars (e.g., granola, protein, cereal)	1 year
Beans and lentils, dried	2 years
Bouillon cubes	1 year
Bread (commercial)	14-18 days
Cakes and muffins (commercial)	3-7 days
<i>*Frozen breads and cakes can be kept indefinitely as long as the food remains frozen. Once thawed, they can be kept in the refrigerator for 4 days.</i>	
Candy	6-12 months
Cereal (hot or cold)	1 year
Cookies	6 months
Cornmeal	1 year
Crackers, pretzels	9 months
Flour	6 months (whole wheat) 1 year (white)
Fruit, dried	6 months
Macaroni and cheese mix	1 year
Nuts (jar or can)	1 year
Nut oils	6-12 months



## Shelf-Stable Items

## Shelf Life After Date Code

### Dry Goods (cont.)

Oils (olive, vegetable, canola)	1 year
Oil sprays (ex. PAM)	2 years
Pasta, dry	2 years
Peanut butter	2 years
Popcorn, kernels	2 years
Popcorn, popped and pre-bagged	3 months
Popcorn, microwave packets	1 year
Potato chips	2 months
Potatoes (mashed, instant flakes)	1 year
Quinoa, dry	3 years
Rice, brown	1 year
Rice, white	2 years
Spices	3 years
Sugar	2 years (after opening)
Toaster pastries	1 year
Tortillas/wraps	3 months

## FREEZE DRIED FOODS:

Freeze-dried products are a type of shelf stable food that can last for years. Freeze drying involves freezing a food item, then removing water from it using a vacuum pump. As a result, most freeze-dried foods are lightweight, easy to prepare, and can last many years (as much as 25 years!). In addition, freeze dried foods typically keep their original flavor and texture, as well as the same amount of nutrients.

## TIPS ON STORING FREEZE DRIED FOOD

- For best quality, refer to manufacturer's packaging for best-by or use-by dates.
- Keep freeze dried foods in a cool, dry environment.
- Inspect foods prior to eating. Check for bad odor, mold or other signs of poor quality. Also check the packaging for dents, holes, or any signs of damage.

# REFRIGERATED PRODUCTS



## TIPS ON STORING REFRIGERATED FOOD:

- Keep all chilled food refrigerated at or below 41°F until consuming or distributing it.
- Leave space for air to circulate between items in the refrigerator.
- Keep raw meats, poultry, or fish on the bottom shelf and ready-to-eat food on the top shelf to avoid dangerous cross-contamination from dripping.
- Rotate stock so older foods can be distributed first.
- You can safely consume most homemade leftovers for up to 4 days as long as they are kept at or below 41°F. For longer storage, freeze them.
- When purchasing or receiving prepared foods not listed in this table, ensure that the product has been properly refrigerated and follow the package use-by date.



Refrigerated Items	Safe Refrigeration Time After Date Code
Bagged lettuce	3-5 days unopened, 2 days after opening
Bean sprouts, bagged	5-10 days
Butter	2 months
Buttermilk	2 weeks
Cheese (cottage, ricotta, soft, cream cheese)	2 weeks
Cheese, hard	6 months
Cheese (shredded, processed slices)	1 month
Cheese, Vegan	4 months
Coffee creamer (liquid, refrigerator)	3 weeks
Cream (half & half, heavy, light)	1 week
Deli meats	5 days
Desserts	4 days
Dips, mixed	5 days
Dough, pie crust	Package use-by date
Eggs in shell	3-5 weeks
Eggs, pasteurized; liquid substitute or real	7 days
Fruit, cut	Package use-by date
Guacamole	4 days
Hot Dogs	2 weeks
Hummus (commercial, pasteurized with preservatives)	3 months
Juice, fresh squeezed or pressed	6 days
Margarine	6 months
Meat, poultry, ground beef, pork, fish, seafood, venison	Use-by date or cook/freeze within 1-3 days of the sell-by date
Milk	1 week
Milk alternatives (soy, almond, rice)	Package use-by date
Pasta, fresh	2 days
Pudding, purchased refrigerated	2 days
Salads, prepared (e.g. macaroni, tuna, egg, potato)	3-5 days
Sour cream	Package use-by date
Tofu	1 week
Whipped cream, aerosol	1 month
Yogurt	2 weeks

# FROZEN PRODUCTS

Most food can be kept indefinitely if it remains continuously frozen at or below 0° F, although the quality can slowly deteriorate over time.

## TIPS ON STORING FROZEN FOOD:

- Keep all frozen food at or below 0° F until distribution. Leave meat, poultry, and seafood in the original packaging when distributing. It is unsafe to open and repack these foods.
- Do not accept frozen foods that have ice crystals or frozen liquids—this is evidence of the food being previously thawed and then refrozen. Freezer burn does not make food unsafe—it appears as grayish brown leathery spots and just means air came into contact with the food.
- All meat from Feeding Westchester is distributed frozen. Meat should not be thawed and refrozen. Once meat is thawed, use it according to the information in the table on the next page.
- Most foods can be frozen indefinitely, but some foods do not freeze well. These foods include mayonnaise, cream sauce, yogurt, cheese, sour cream, milk, and lettuce. Raw meat and poultry will maintain their quality longer when frozen than cooked meat and poultry because moisture is lost during cooking.
- Other items that should not be frozen include canned foods, eggs, and aerosol cans.

## SAFE THAWING:

Never thaw foods at room temperature! Bacteria grows rapidly at room temperature and can make your food dangerous to eat. You can thaw food safely in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave.





Food purchased frozen	Recommended time in freezer for best quality	Recommended time to store in fridge after thawing
Bacon, ham, lunch meats, hot dogs, pepperoni (unopened)	1-2 months	1-2 weeks
Bread, bagels	3 months	2 days
Chicken nuggets/patties/strips	3 months	2 days
Desserts, cookies	8-12 months	1 week
Desserts, fruit pies	4 months (baked) 3 months (unbaked)	1 week
Dough (bread or cookie)	12 months	3-4 days after cooking
Juice concentrates	2 years	7-10 days
Fruits such as berries, melon	10-18 months	Refrigeration not recommended; keep frozen
Vegetables	10-18 months	4 days after cooking
Ice cream	6 months	Refrigeration not recommended; keep frozen
Fresh poultry	1 year (whole), 9 months (pieces)	1-2 days
Fresh meat (beef, veal, lamb, and pork)	4-12 months	3-5 days
Ground meats and poultry	3-4 months	1-2 days
Cooked meat or poultry dishes	2-6 months	3-4 days
Fish	3-8 months (raw) 3 months (cooked)	1-2 days (raw) 3-4 days (cooked)
Shellfish	3-12 months	1-2 days (raw)
Prepared meals/frozen entrees	12 months	Refrigeration not recommended; keep frozen until ready to cook
Soy meat substitutes	12-18 months	3-4 days (after cooking); otherwise keep frozen
Waffles, pancakes	3 months	Refrigeration not recommended; keep frozen until ready to cook

# FRESH PRODUCE

## TIPS ON STORING FRESH PRODUCE:

Most fruits and vegetables have the best quality when kept refrigerated. There are, however, some exceptions:

- Tomatoes taste best when left at room temperature. Cold storage can cause them to become dull and mealy. However, once you've cut your tomatoes, refrigerate and store them in an airtight container or zip top bag for safe keeping.
- Bananas should not be refrigerated unless fully ripe, and then they should be used within 1-2 days. Refrigeration will cause banana skin to blacken, but the fruit will not ripen while cold.
- Unripe apples, avocados, mangoes, and stone fruits (apricots, plums, peaches, etc.) should be at room temperature until ripened, but these items should be refrigerated once ripe.
- Hardy vegetables like onions, garlic, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and winter squash should be stored in cool, dark places outside of the refrigerator. Store your potatoes and onions separately! Onions release a gas that can speed up sprouting in potatoes.
- Never store produce below meat or fish in the refrigerator. If you have produce that is about to spoil, be creative!
- Brown bananas are perfect for banana bread, apples can be made into applesauce, and tomatoes can be made into tomato sauce.





# STORAGE OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

## Refrigerator

Apples (>7 days)\*

Apricots\*                      Figs\*

### (Unwashed in a single layer)

Blackberries                  Raspberries

Blueberries                  Strawberries

### (Unwashed in a plastic bag)

Broccoli                      Green Onions

Carrots                      Lettuce

Cauliflower

### (Store in a paper bag)

Mushrooms                  Okra

Artichokes                  Kale

Asparagus                  Lima Beans

Beets                          Leafy Vegetables

Bell Peppers                  Leeks

Brussels Sprouts              Spinach

Cabbage                      Sprouts

Celery                          Summer Squash

Cherries                      Yellow Squash

Cucumbers                  Zucchini

Grapes

Green Beans

Herbs (except  
Basil)

## Countertop

Apples (>7 days)\*

Bananas\*                      Tomatoes\*

Citrus Fruits\*

Basil                          Mangoes

Cucumbers                  Oranges

Eggplants                      Papayas

Garlic                          Persimmons

Ginger                          Pineapples

Grapefruits                  Plantains

Jicamas                          Pomegranates

Lemons                          Watermelon

Limes

## Cool, Dry Place

Acorn Squash                  Pumpkins

Butternut Squash              Onions

Potatoes                          Sweet Potatoes

Winter Squash                  Spaghetti Squash

## Counter/Fridge

Avocados\*                      Pears\*

Nectarines\*                      Peaches\*

Plums\*                          Kiwi

Cantaloupes\*                  Honeydews\*

**\*High gas producer:** Keep away from other fresh produce to slow down ripening/spoilage

**\*These items should be stored on the countertop until ripened or cut, then refrigerated**

# TIME AND TEMPERATURE

Monitoring the temperature of food is also an important part of keeping it safe. In general, you should always keep hot foods hot, and cold foods cold. Leaving food out for too long, or failing to maintain proper temperatures can allow bacteria and other pathogens, time to grow to dangerous levels and increase the risk of food-borne illnesses.

The “Danger Zone” is the temperature range (40°F to 140°F) in which bacteria grows very fast. It is important to keep food out of this temperature range. One way to do this is to cook food until it has reached a safe minimum internal temperature.

## TIPS ON MONITORING TIME AND TEMPERATURE:

- The color of food is not a reliable indicator of its safety or doneness, use a thermometer to measure the internal temperature of the food prior to eating.
- When using a thermometer to check the temperature of cooked foods, insert the probe of the thermometer into the thickest part of the food. Avoid touching the bone or fat. Check the temperature in at least several places to ensure that the food is cooked to safe minimal temperatures
- Clean and sanitize your food thermometers before and after each use.

Below are safe minimum internal temperatures as recommended by the Food Safety and Inspection Service (2020a, 2023) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (2022, p. 623).

Food product	Internal temperature (°F)
All poultry - including whole or ground chicken turkey or duck	165°F
Stuffed meat, seafood, poultry or pasta	165°F
Leftovers and casseroles	165°F
Egg dishes (for example - quiche, frittata)	160°F
Ground meat - including beef, pork, and other meat, as well as ground seafood	160°F
Seafood - including fish, shellfish, and crustaceans	145°F
Beef, pork, veal and lamb (roasts, steaks, and chops)	145°F - rest for 3 minutes





# ADDITIONAL FOOD SAFETY RESOURCES

## Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

<https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/>

## FoodKeeper App

<https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/foodkeeper-app>

Developed by the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection service, with Cornell University and the Food Marketing Institute. The app provides specific storage recommendations on a variety of foods which you can search from or browse from a list.

## FoodSafety.gov

[www.foodsafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov)

Food safety information provided by our government, including recalls and tips.

## USDA - Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)

<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/>

# REFERENCES:

1. Food Safety and Inspection Service. (2013, June 27). Doneness Versus Safety. U.S. Department of Agriculture. <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/doneness-versus-safety#:~:text=Appearance%20and%20color%20are%20not,consistently%20use%20a%20food%20thermometer.> "
2. Food Safety and Inspection Service. (2020, May 11). Safe Minimum Internal Temperature Chart. U.S. Department of Agriculture. <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/safe-temperature-chart> "
3. Food Safety and Inspection Service. (2020, October). How Temperatures Affect Food. U.S. Department of Agriculture. [https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/how-temperatures-affect-food#:~:text=Cold%20Storage%20Temperatures-,The%20%22Danger%20Zone%22%20\(40,%C2%B0F%2D140%20%C2%B0F\)&text=This%20orange%20of%20temperatures%20is,out%20more%20than%201%20hour](https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/how-temperatures-affect-food#:~:text=Cold%20Storage%20Temperatures-,The%20%22Danger%20Zone%22%20(40,%C2%B0F%2D140%20%C2%B0F)&text=This%20orange%20of%20temperatures%20is,out%20more%20than%201%20hour) "
4. Food Safety and Inspection Service. (2023, September 19). Cook to a Safe Minimum Internal Temperature. U.S. Department of Agriculture. <https://www.foodsafety.gov/food-safety-charts/safe-minimum-internal-temperatures> "
5. Klemm, S. and Kohn, J. (2021, February 19). A Short Guide to Food Thermometers. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. <https://www.eatright.org/food/home-food-safety/safe-cooking-and-prep/a-short-guide-to-food-thermometers.> "
6. U.S. Food and Drug Administration (2022). Food Code. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [https://www.fda.gov/food/fda-food-code/food-code-2022.](https://www.fda.gov/food/fda-food-code/food-code-2022)
7. U.S. Department of Health and Human Service. (April 2019). Foodkeeper App. Retrieved October 11, 2023 from <https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/foodkeeper-app> "





SCAN HERE FOR THE DIGITAL VERSION

