



Storage and Handling of Commercially Packaged Foods

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Proper selection of foods at the grocery store and appropriate storage and handling practices at home are necessary to maintain the quality and safety of commercially processed foods and perishable foods. When foods are improperly handled or stored, bacteria can grow, causing the product to spoil quickly or be unsafe to eat — regardless of the expiration date on the package.



Commercially processed foods are usually found stored on grocery store shelves and include foods that have been heat-treated.

- Are canned or packaged in bottles, flexible pouches, bags, or boxes.
- Are packaged by a commercial processor, not an individual in a private home.
- Are “shelf stable,” meaning they can be stored at room temperature until ready to use.
- Packaged, perishable foods are those that spoil quickly if not stored at a refrigerated temperature of 40 degrees Fahrenheit or below promptly after their

purchase. They include: cooked or uncooked meat, poultry, fish, dairy, and eggs and their products.

- Pre-prepared, cooked dishes purchased from the grocery deli or meals section, such as vegetables, pasta, rice, potatoes, etc.

Following are some guidelines to use when buying, handling, and storing packaged foods.

At the Grocery Store

- Inspect packaging for damage, stains, and leakage.
- Do not purchase canned goods with body or seam-side dents, visible rust, or bulges at the top or bottom.
- Do not purchase jars with visible cracks.
- Do not purchase packaged meats, poultry, dairy products, or eggs with “off” odors or disagreeable appearances. Never purchase cracked eggs.
- Check package dates and purchase products before the “use-by” or “best-by” date.



Food Product Dating: What Does It All Mean?

Consumers rely on product dating to determine when to purchase or use a product. The quality of nearly all food products tends to decline after manufacturing to a point where the product is no longer acceptable to

the consumer. Food manufacturers determine the dates during which the food product will be at an acceptable level of quality (i.e., best texture, appearance, aroma, and flavor) under normal storage conditions. These dates are NOT an indication of product safety.

Except for infant formula and some baby foods, food companies are not required by federal law to date their products, though some state regulations do require them for certain products. Even so, many companies include them to assist consumers.



“Sell-by” date – Tells the store how long it can display the product for sale.

“Best-if-used-by” date – Tells the consumer how long the product will be at its best flavor or quality.

“Use-by” date – Tells the consumer the last date recommended for using the product while at its peak quality and flavor. These dates are required on infant formula and some baby foods.

“Closed or coded” – Packing codes used by manufacturers to help track the product; they do not relate to product freshness or quality.

Commercially processed foods such as canned products and other packaged goods can be suitable for eating after the sell-by or best-by date if they have been handled and stored properly — though their quality may have diminished. If products have not been stored or handled properly, they may not be suitable for consumption and should be discarded.

The following are practices that consumers should follow in order to properly store and handle their commercially packaged products after bringing them home.

Canned and Store-Bought Packaged Goods

- Store in a dry, cool place (50 F to 70 F) like kitchen cabinets and away from warm places, such as above a stove, oven, or furnace.
- Do not store in a garage or crawl space due to extreme hot and cold temperatures that can speed deterioration and affect taste and appearance.
- Do not store foods under a sink where packaged foods can absorb moisture from the humidity. Canned goods will rust and cause products to leak and spoil. Boxed/ dry foods can absorb moisture, resulting in caked and stale products.
- In general, canned vegetables, vegetable soups, meat, poultry, and fish can be stored from two to five years. Canned fruits, tomatoes, tomato soup, and juices can be stored from 12 to 18 months.
- Once a can or package is opened, the product starts to spoil. Transfer any unused portions (e.g., canned milk or juice) into clean, tightly covered containers and refrigerate.
- Read the label for additional storage and handling instructions. Look for the words “keep refrigerated” or “refrigerate after opening” to know whether the product should be refrigerated.

Packaged Perishable and Refrigerated Foods

- Keep at refrigerated temperatures of 40 F or below.
- Purchase meat and poultry products before the “sell-by” date has expired. Cook or freeze if you cannot use them within one or two days after purchase. Frozen products will last longer than the dates indicated on the package. Cook frozen product as soon as it thaws. Read the “safe-handling label” for cooking and storage information.
- If product has a “use-by” date, follow that date (unless you freeze the product).



Guidelines for Storage of Some Commercially Canned, Packaged and Perishable Foods

If product has a “use-by” date, follow that date; if product has a “sell-by” date or no date, cook or freeze the product within the times indicated on this chart.

Product	Pantry or room storage (unopened)	Refrigerator storage (opened, 40 F)	Freezer storage (0 F)
Canned, jar, or plastic (shelf-stable)			
Baby food – jars	1–2 yrs	1–3 days	
Coffee – cans	2 yrs (2–4 wks opened)	2 mos	6 mos
Fish	1 yr	1–2 days	
Fruits, fruit juices	1 yr	3–5 days	1–2 mos (opened)
Ham	2 yrs	3–5 days	
Mayonnaise	2–3 mos	2 mos	
Meat, poultry	2–5 yrs	3–4 days	4–6 wks (opened)
Peanut butter	6–9 mos (2–3 mos opened)	4–6 mos	
Vegetable soup	1 yr	3–4 days	2–3 mos (opened)
Vegetables	1 yr	3–5 days	1–2 mos (opened)
Meats/poultry			
Beef – fresh ground		1–2 days*	3–4 mos
Beef – fresh steaks, roasts		3–5 days*	6–12 mos
Chicken – fresh parts		1–2 days*	9 mos
Chicken – fresh whole		1–2 days*	1 yr
Ham – fully cooked whole		1 wk*	1–2 mos
Hot dogs, lunch meats		3–7 days (2 wks unopened)	1–2 mos
Pork – fresh chops		3–5 days*	4–6 mos
Dairy			
Butter		1–3 mos	6–9 mos
Cheese – hard (i.e., cheddar, swiss)		3–4 wks (3–6 mos unopened)	6 mos
Cheese – processed		3–4 wks	6–8 mos
Cheese – soft		1 wk	6 mos
Milk		8–20 days	3 mos
Eggs			
Fresh, in shell		3–5 wks	
Hard boiled		1 wk	
Pasteurized liquid		3 days (10 days unopened)	1 yr
Seafood			
Fish – fresh, lean fillets		1–2 days	6–10 mos
Oysters, clams – shucked		4–5 days	3 mos
Shrimp – fresh		4 days	3–6 mos
Other packaged foods			
Breads – purchased	5–7 days	1–2 wks	2–3 mos
Cake mixes	6–9 mos		
Cereals – ready-to-eat	1 yr (2–3 mos opened)		
Herbs – dried; spices – ground	6 mos		1–2 yrs
Flour – white	6–8 mos	1 yr	1–2 yrs
Fruit – pre-cut, fresh		2–4 days	2–3 mos
Nutritional supplements – adult	As stated on the container	2 days	
Salads – pre-cut, bagged		2 days (10–14 days unopened)	

Note: For a more comprehensive list on food storage, refer to “Food Storage Guidelines for Consumers,” VCE publication 348-960 (FST-66P).

*Or by the date on the package.

- Pasteurized milk should remain edible for two to five days after its “sell-by” date if it has been stored at refrigerated temperatures below 40 F. Eggs can be used three to five weeks after purchase if they have been properly stored (below 40 F). The “sell-by” date is usually 45 days from the date eggs were packed by the producer.
- Cook or freeze seafood, such as fresh fish, shrimp, and crab, within one to two days after purchase.

Use the information in the table provided, Guidelines for Storage of Some Commercially Canned, Packaged, and Perishable Foods, for more information.

What if the Product Date Expires During Home Storage?

If the product date has expired and the product has been handled and stored properly, then evaluate the product before potential use, following these guidelines. Don’t use or taste any product with an off odor or appearance or from any container that spurts liquid when opening.

- Discard cans that leak or are severely dented, bulging, or rusted; discard jars with cracks or loose or bulging lids.
- Discard packages that are broken, damaged, leaking, stained, or have the presence of mold or insects.
- Discard meat, poultry, dairy items, and egg products that show signs of spoilage, such as off odors, slime, color changes, or mold.
- The “sell-by” date for eggs may expire during refrigerated storage, but the eggs can be safe to use if they have been stored at refrigerated temperatures below 40 F.
- Use baby formula and baby foods by the “use-by” date to ensure the product still meets the nutritional and quality standards stated on the label. Discard after this date.

Resources

Association of Food and Drug Officials. 1987. *A Pocket Guide to Can Defects*. York, PA: AFDO.
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U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service. 2015. “Food Product Dating” Web page. Accessed May 19. www.fsis.usda.gov.

University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension. 2005. *Keeping Food Safe*. Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program publication B3474.
www.learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/B3474.pdf.

This publication does not include information on foods canned at home. For information on home canning and food preservation, visit Virginia Cooperative Extension’s “Home Food Preservation” Web page at www.ext.vt.edu/topics/food-health/home-food-preservation/index.html.