

Food Use by Dates

Here's a superbly-kept secret: All those dates on food products -- sell by, use by, best before -- almost none of those dates indicate the safety of food, and generally speaking, they're not regulated in the way many people believe. The current system of expiration dates misleads consumers to believe they must discard food in order to protect their own safety. In fact, **the dates are only suggestions by the manufacturer for when the food is at its peak quality, not when it is unsafe to eat.**

"Use by" and "Best by": These dates are intended for consumer use, but are typically the date the manufacturer deems the product reaches peak freshness. **It's not a date to indicate spoilage, nor does it necessarily signal that the food is no longer safe to eat.**

"Sell by": This date is only intended to help manufacturers and retailers, not consumers. It's a stocking and marketing tool provided by food makers to ensure proper turnover of the products in the store so they still have a long shelf life after consumers buy them. Consumers, however, are misinterpreting it as a date to guide their buying decisions. The report authors say that "sell by" dates should be made invisible to the consumer.

Jena Roberts, vice president for business development at the food testing firm, National Food Lab, studies "shelf-stable" properties of foods to help manufacturers determine what date indicates when their products are at their best.

"The food has to be safe, that's a given," says Roberts. "[The manufacturers] want to make sure the consumer eats and tastes a high quality product."

But she acknowledges that **even if the food is consumed after its ideal quality date, it's not harmful.** A strawberry-flavored beverage may lose its red color, the oats in a granola bar may lose its crunch, or the chocolate clusters in a cereal may start to 'bloom' and turn white. While it may not look appetizing, the food is still safe to eat.

"It's a confusing subject, the difference between food quality and food safety. Even in the food industry I have colleagues who are not microbiologists who get confused," she says.

The report authors aren't against food date labeling. The system was created to provide more information to consumers, but it's important that people know how to use that data.

"The interest is still there on the part of the consumers, but we want this to be clearly communicated so consumers are not misinterpreting the data and contributing to a bunch of waste," says Gunders.

While the food industry could make changes to date labels voluntarily — such as having the dates read when food is most likely to spoil — the study authors also call for legislation by Congress to develop national standards that would standardize a single set of dating requirements.