

Shelf Life of Food Bank Products

By NDSU Extension

Adapted from the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank
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Introduction

We were pleased to find the original guide developed by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. We appreciate their efforts in making this information available. We have updated the food storage information and references to provide the most recent information we have available.

North Dakota State University Extension has county-based office personnel that work with community partners, including food pantries, throughout North Dakota. See <https://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension> to learn more about the role of NDSU Extension, including the Family and Community Wellness (FCW), EFNEP and SNAP-Ed programs. See www.ag.ndsu.edu/food to explore a wide range of information to help make use of foods.

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How to use this guide

This guide provides a brief introduction about how manufacturers use dates to code their food for purchase. Then, the guide offers a series of charts that provide guidance on how long different foods can be safely consumed past the date stamped on the packaging. The foods listed in this guide are organized according to the following categories:

- **Explanation of Package Code Dates:** Few products have a set expiration date. Find out what the dates on your packages really mean.
- **Examining Cans and Boxes for Safety:** When is a package too damaged to be safe?
- **Shelf-stable Foods** include foods that can be stored at room temperature before opening. This category includes unopened baby foods, condiments, canned goods and dry goods.
- **Shelf-stable Beverages** include juices, soda, water and other drinks designed to be stored at room temperature until opening. Do not confuse these items with beverages that must be kept refrigerated.
- **Foods Purchased Refrigerated:** This category includes beverages that must be kept cold. Many of these items can be frozen after purchase to increase their storage time. This guide indicates how long an item can be expected to keep in the refrigerator or freezer.
- **Foods Purchased Frozen** include foods that would be found in the freezer section of a grocery store. These foods should be stored frozen until they are to be used and should be pulled only as needed for immediate distribution.
- **Fresh Meats:** This includes meats distributed frozen through the food bank. These meats were frozen on or before the sell-by date marked on each package. Meats will keep indefinitely when they remain solidly frozen and are stored at freezer temperatures and retain their quality best if properly packaged. They should be pulled from the freezer only as needed for immediate distribution.
- **Prepared Foods** include prepared dips, side dishes, salads, etc. These items are sometimes available from a cooler at the Food Bank, or may be available through other donation streams. These items are generally perishable, and you should pay close attention to how long the best by date can be extended safely.
- **Fresh Produce** shelf life involves many factors, making it very challenging to provide a reliable timeline for how long certain items will be good. However, we have provided some tips for how to store certain items for longest life and best flavor.

What do the dates on food packages mean?

The only foods that are required by federal law to have expiration dates are baby food and infant formula. The Food Bank does not distribute most baby food past its expiration date. However, some products designed for babies such as juice and cookies or biscuits can be distributed past their date and are safe to eat.

Many canned and boxed products are safe to eat long after the date on the container. Further, the shelf life of refrigerated and frozen foods can be extended if they are handled properly. Once a perishable item is frozen, the expiration date does not matter. Foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely, though the quality slowly deteriorates over time. For this reason, listing the “freezing date” on the package is a good practice. Here are some code dates you may see on food packages:

Expiration Date (Examples: Expires 11/15/24 or Do not use after 11/15/24)

- **Look for it on:** Baby food and formula, yeast, baking powder.
- **What it means:** Do not distribute infant formula or baby food after the expiration date. Yeast and baking powder work less well after expiration but are safe to eat.

Pack Date (Examples: Packed on 03/01/2024 or 22:5306424 or KL064)

- **Look for it on:** Canned food, crackers, cookies, spices.
- **What it means:** This is the date the food was packaged. A code is often used that cannot be understood by the general public, often numbering days sequentially such that January 1 is day 001 and December 31 is day 365 (366 in leap years). Usually, this food is of good quality and safe to eat for a time past the date.

Sell-By Date (Example: Sell by January 1, 2024. Also called **Pull Date**)

- **Look for it on:** Refrigerated foods such as milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, eggs, lunch meat, packaged salad mixes and other foods.
- **What it means:** The store must sell these foods before the code date listed and often donates these foods when they are close to date. If the food has been handled properly, it is still safe to eat and the quality is good. Food Bank staff monitors this food to ensure that the quality remains good.

Use-By or Quality Date (Examples: Best if used by 1/1/24 or Use Before 1/1/24)

- **Look for it on:** Crackers, cookies, cold cereals, and other dry, shelf-stable food.
- **What it means:** This date is the manufacturer’s recommendation for how long the food will be at peak quality. After the quality date, the food is still safe to eat but slowly begins to lose nutrients and the quality begins to lessen.

Shelf-stable product

Most shelf-stable or dry foods (cans, boxes, bags) remain edible for several days, months or even years past their code date. Always examine the packaging to make sure it has not been damaged extensively, making the food unsafe to eat.

Do not consume food from cans or jars if any of these are true of the container or food:

- Leaking or stained
- Swollen
- Rusty
- Badly dented, crimped or pinched
- Cracked
- Foul odor
- Broken or missing safety seals
- Loose or missing lids
- Foods exhibit changed color or odor. Do not taste suspicious foods.

Do not consume food from boxes:

If the inner bag:

- Is torn or leaking.
- Has moldy or foreign objects inside.
- Seals are ripped.

If the box without an inside bag:

- Is open or torn.
- Has live or dead insects, webs or droppings.
- Is stained or wet.

Tips on storing canned and boxed food:

- Store cans and boxes off the floor, either on a pallet or shelf and 18 inches away from the outer wall so air can circulate. This will help with cleaning, monitoring condensation and wall temperatures that could affect food safety and quality.
- Store canned and boxed goods in a clean, dry and cool area. A temperature range of 50 to 70°F storage temperature can help maximize shelf life.
- 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.

Shelf-Stable Foods	Shelf Life from Date of Purchase
Baby Food	
Cereal, dry mixes	Use by date
Food in jars, cans	Use by date
Formula prepared	Use by date
Canned Foods	
Ham	6-9 months
High-acid foods fruit (including applesauce, juices) pickles, sauerkraut baked beans w/mustard/vinegar tomatoes, tomato-based soups & sauces	12-18 months
Low-acid foods gravy, soups, meat, fish pasta, stews vegetables (not tomatoes)	2-5 years
Meat Products	5 years
Aseptically-packaged Products	
Broth: beef or chicken commercially produced	Use by date
Milk ultra-pasteurized	1-3 months
Condiments, Sauces and Syrups	
Barbecue sauce, bottled	1 year
Gravy, dry mix envelopes	2 years
Honey	2 years
Jams, jellies, preserves	6-18 months
Ketchup, cocktail, or chili sauce	1 year
Mayonnaise	3-6 months
Molasses	1-2 years
Mustard	1-2 years
Olives, black and green	12-18 months
Pickles	1 year
Salad dressings, bottled	10-12 months
Salsa picante and taco sauces	1 year

Source: FoodSafety.gov

Shelf-Stable Foods (Continued)	Shelf Life from Date of Purchase
Condiments, Sauces, Syrups (Continued)	
Spaghetti and pizza sauce, canned	Use by date
Spaghetti sauce, jarred	18 months
Syrup, chocolate	2 years
Syrup, corn	3 years
Syrup	1 year
Vinegar	2 years
Worcestershire sauce	1 year
Dry Goods	
Baking mix, pancake or biscuit	9 months
Baking mixes: brownie, cake, bread,	12-18 months
Baking powder	6-18 months
Baking soda	2-3 years
Beans, dried	1-2 years
Bouillon, dry	1 year
Bread, commercially prepared (including rolls)	14-18 days
Cakes, commercially prepared	3-7 days
Cereal, ready to eat	6-12 months
Cereal, cook before eating	1 year
Cornmeal regular, degerminated	6-12 months
Crackers	8 months Except graham crackers, 6-9 months
Flour, white (all purpose or cake)	6-12 months
Flour, whole wheat	3-6 months 6-8 months if refrigerated after opening
Fruit, dried	6 months
Nuts, jars or cans	1 year
Oatmeal	1 year
Oil: olive or vegetable	6-12 months
Pasta, dry (egg noodles)	2 years
Pasta, dry (no egg)	2 years

Source: FoodSafety.gov

Shelf-Stable Foods (Continued)	Shelf Life from Date of Purchase
Dry Goods (Continued)	
Peanut butter	6-24 months
Popcorn, kernels	2 years
Popcorn, commercially popped in bags	2-3 months
Popcorn, microwave packets	6-12 months
Potato chips	2 months or use by date
Potatoes, instant	10-15 months
Pretzels	4-9 months
Rice, brown	1 year
Rice, white or wild	2 years
Shortening, solid	1-2 years
Spices	3-4 years for whole spices 2-3 years for ground spices
Dry stuffing mix	9-12 months
Sugar, brown (light or dark)	Indefinitely
Sugar, confectioners	Indefinitely
Sugar, granulated	Indefinitely
Sugar substitutes	2 years
Toaster pastries	6-12 months
Tortillas	3 months for flour tortillas 25-45 days for corn tortillas

Source: FoodSafety.gov

The following information applies only to shelf-stable beverages. Juices and milk products requiring refrigeration are covered in the next section, along with other refrigerated items.

Shelf-Stable Beverages	Shelf Life from Date of Purchase
Cocoa mixes	Indefinitely
Coffee creamer, powdered	2 years
Coffee, commercial ground non vacuum	2 years
Coffee, instant	1 year
Coffee, whole bean	3-5 months
Instant breakfast drinks, bottled	6 months
Juice, box	Use by date
Milk, canned, evaporated or condensed	1 year
Nutritional supplement drinks, bottled	Use by date
Tea, bagged	18-36 months
Tea, instant	2-3 years
Tea, loose leaf	2 years
Water commercially bottled	Indefinitely

Source: FoodSafety.gov

Tips on Storing Refrigerated Food:

- Keep all chilled food refrigerated at 40°F or below until distribution.
- Store eggs in their original carton.
- Leave space for air to circulate between items in the refrigerator.
- Rotate stock so that older foods are distributed first.

Dairy and Cooler Items	Refrigerated (40°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Butter	1-2 months	6-9 months
Buttermilk	1-2 weeks	3 months
Cheese, cottage	2 weeks	Not Recommended
Cheese, cream	2 weeks	Not Recommended
Cheese, hard	6 months	6 months
Cheese, soft	1-2 weeks	6 months
Cheese, processed slices	3-4 weeks	Not Recommended
Coffee creamer, liquid refrigerated	3 weeks	
Cream, half & half	3-4 days	4 months
Cream, heavy	10 days	3-4 months
Crust, pie, refrigerated	Use by date	2 months
Dips, made with sour cream	2 weeks	Not Recommended
Dough, biscuit fridge	Use by date	Not Recommended
Dough, tube cans	Use by date	Not Recommended
Dough, cookie	Use by date	2 months
Eggs, in shell	3-5 weeks	Not Recommended
Egg substitute, liquid	7 days	Not Recommended
Margarine	6 months	12 months
Milk, plain or flavored	Use by date *(7 days after use by date if continually refrigerated)	3 months
Milk, rice	Use by date	Not Available
Milk, soy	Use by date	Not Available
Pudding	Use by date	Not Recommended
Sour cream	Use by date	Not Recommended
Whipped cream, aerosol	3-4 weeks	Not Recommended
Whipped topping, aerosol	3 months	Not Recommended
Whipped topping, tub	2 weeks	14 months
Yogurt	1-2 weeks	1-2 months

Source: FoodSafety.gov and *stilltasty.com

Tips on Storing Frozen Food:

- If food remains continuously frozen, it will last much longer than if it is exposed to changing temperatures. Keep all frozen food at 0°F or below until distribution.
- Leave meat, poultry and seafood in the original packaging when distributing. It is unsafe to open and repack these foods.

Items Purchased Frozen	Frozen (0°F or below)
Bread, bagels	3 months
Dough, bread	1 year
Dough, cookie	1 year
Egg substitutes	1 year
Entrée, frozen/prepared meal	1 year
Fish, breaded	18 months
Ice pops	9 months
Fruit such as berries, melons	10-18 months
Ice cream	6 months
Juice concentrates	2 years
Soy meat substitutes	12-18 months
Vegetables, frozen	10-18 months
Waffles, pancakes	3 months

Source: FoodSafety.gov

Meats distributed through the Food Bank should be completely frozen, and stored at 0°F or lower for as long as possible before distribution. Do not leave meats at room temperature.

Meats, Fresh	Refrigerated (40°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Fish/ Seafood, Raw		
Fatty fish: salmon, mackerel, tuna, bluefish	1-2 days	2-3 months
Lean fish: cod, flounder, haddock, halibut, sole	1-2 days	6-8 months
Shrimp crayfish, raw	1-3 days	6-18 months
Crab, legs	2-4 days	9-12 months
Oysters, shucked	3-10 days	3-4 months
Lobster, fresh whole live	1 day	Not Recommended
Scallops, raw	1-3 days	6-18 months
Meats, Raw		
Beef roasts	3-5 days	4-12 months
Beef steaks	3-5 days	4-12 months
Pork roasts	3-5 days	4-12 months
Pork chops	3-5 days	4-12 months
Lamb roasts	3-5 days	4-12 months
Lamb chops	3-5 days	4-12 months
Whole chicken or turkey	1-2 days	1 year
Ground meats: beef, pork, lamb	1-2 days	3-4 months
Meats, Processed		
Bacon	1 week	1 month
Chicken, fried	3-4 days	4 months
Chicken, nuggets/patties		1-3 months
Ham, deli	2 weeks	1-2 months
Hot dogs	2 weeks	1-2 months
Luncheon meats, deli-sliced	3-5 days	1-2 months
Luncheon meats, commercial package	2 weeks	1-2 months
Pepperoni, salami sliced	2-3 weeks	1-2 months
Sausage, raw and frozen	3-4 days	1-2 months
Sausage, smoked links fully cooked, kielbasa	1 week	1-2 months

Source: FoodSafety.gov

Prepared foods should be kept refrigerated until distributed. These foods are perishable, and leaving them at room temperature will shorten their shelf life.

Prepared Items/ Deli Foods	Refrigerated (40°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Fruit, cut	Use by date	Not Recommended
Guacamole	3-4 days	3-4 months
Hummus, pasteurized with preservatives	3 months	Not Recommended
Hummus, no preservatives	7 days	Not Recommended
Meats in gravy or broth	3-4 days	6 months
Pasta, fresh	1-2 days	2 months
Salads, prepared: egg, chicken, tuna	3-4 days	Not Recommended
Soups, stews	3-4 days	2-3 months
Spinach, salad greens (bagged)	3-5 days	Not Recommended

Source: FoodSafety.gov

Tips on Storing Fresh Produce:

Most fruits and vegetables have the best quality when kept refrigerated.

There are, however, some exceptions:

- Tomatoes taste best if not refrigerated. Cold storage can cause them to become mealy.
- 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.
- Fresh apples, mangoes and stone fruits (plums, peaches, etc.) can be stored at room temperature, but these items should be refrigerated as they ripen.
- Hardy vegetables like onions, garlic, potatoes, sweet potatoes and winter squash can be stored in cool, dark places outside of the cooler.

Sources

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