Sold on sell-by dates? [1]

Dear Alice,

What's the difference between sell by dates, eat by dates, etc.? Is there even a difference, or is this always the expiration date?

Answer

Dear Reader,

With all these vague, different, and vaguely different terms out there like the ones you listed, it's no wonder that this "dating game" can be so confusing. Here's a quick guide to navigating the alphabet (and number) soup you may find stamped all over your food:

**Use or lose:** The "use-by," "best if used by (or before)," and "quality assurance" dates tell you the last date that the product will be at its best flavor and highest quality. This doesn't mean the food is unsafe to eat after that date, but it may taste better on or before the given date.

**Expired and retired:** The term "expired by" or "expiration date" is the latest date that the food should be eaten or used. Except, that is, for federally graded eggs (the kinds you see stamped with A, AA, etc.). If these eggs are purchased before the expiration date, you can use them for the next three to five weeks starting from the time you bought them.

**No use in crying over pulled milk:** "Sell-by" or "pull" is printed on packages to tell the retailer when the last day to sell the product should be. This date factors in the time that the food will be stored and used at home. You should buy things before this date, but you don't have to finish them before this date. This is a common case with milk, which can be used for as many as seven days after its sell-by date.

**Pack it up:** "Packed on" or "package date" indicates when the food was processed or packaged. Although this isn't an indicator of the safety or quality of the food, it can tell you which foods are fresher than others. This is often seen on meat products.

**Speaking in code:** In case of a recall, the producers and manufacturers use the
"coded date" to trace foods across state lines. It's usually a series of letters and/or numbers and has no bearing on the freshness, quality, or safety of the food.

Besides buying and using foods by the appropriate dates, it's also important to follow proper storage and handling guidelines to ensure that food will not spoil and make you sick. For instance, raw meat should be cooked and consumed within two days after purchase or be frozen if you're thinking about keeping it longer than that. Ground meat should not be frozen for longer than four months because while it will be safe to eat indefinitely, the quality of the meat degrades over time. Even foods that have been cooked can cause illness if they're kept out or stored improperly. To that end, all raw or partially cooked meat products should also bear a safe food handling label for instructions on how to properly handle raw and cooked meat.

Hope this clears up the confusion.

Alice!
Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity
Miscellaneous

Related questions
Forgot to refrigerate leftovers? still okay to eat?
How fast do food poisoning symptoms show up?
What medicine is there to treat food poisoning?
Condom expiration dates
Health risks of cockroaches?
Campylobacteriosis: Attack of the meaty bacteria!

Published date:
Nov 17, 2006
Last reviewed on:
Sep 16, 2014

Footer menu

Contact Alice!
Content Use
Media Inquiries
Comments & Corrections
Syndication & Licensing
Licensing Q&As
Get Alice! on Your Website
Full Site Syndication
Link to Go Ask Alice!

Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.
If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/sold-sell-dates#comment-0

Links