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 and varied terms out there such as the ones you listed, it's no wonder that this date-ing game is so confusing. To make the expiration question especially exasperating, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) doesn't require that use-by or sell-by dates be printed on food items. Because of that, there isn't a universally accepted format for food labels in the United States. Infant formula is the one exception — it's federally mandated that baby food have a use-by date to ensure it contains the full nutrient content listed on the label when it's consumed. Some states require dates be printed on egg cartons for 30 days after packaging if the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) grade shield is displayed on the product. Whether or not a manufacturer decides to include these dates, they don't necessarily indicate an expiration date. Purchasing foods before the dates indicated can help folks get the most quality, freshness, and flavor out of their consumables.

To help you more easily navigate food freshness, here's a quick guide to 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 can be eaten or used safely. 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 the last day to sell the product. This date factors in the time that the food will be
stored and used at home. It’s okay to buy things before this date, but don’t feel like you have to finish them before this date. This rule applies to 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 can often be 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. The coded date usually consists of a series of letters 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 good to follow proper storage and handling guidelines to ensure that food won't spoil and cause illness. Even though the date printed on a given food item may not be the actual expiration date, it’s wise to avoid purchasing food after that day. With many unopened and properly handled food items, it’s safe to consume them after the date listed, but it’s best to freeze or toss perishable foods if not consumed before their use-by dates. For instance, it’s best to cook or consume raw meat within two days after purchase or be frozen if you’re thinking about keeping it longer than that. A general recommendation is to avoid freezing ground meat for longer than four months because while it'll 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 have a safe food handling label for instructions on how to properly handle raw and cooked meat.

Hope this data helps inform future "by date" analysis,

Alice!

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