Food Product Dates
What do they mean?

Sharon Valentine, MBA, L.E.H.P.
Director of Environmental Programs
St. Clair County Health Department
Food Product Dating

- Except for infant formula, dates on food products are not required by any Federal Law or Regulation.
- Some states (but not all) have requirements for them.
“Open Dating” is a calendar date applied to a food product by the manufacturer or retailer. The calendar dates provides consumers with information on the estimated period of time for which the product will be of best quality and to help the store determine how long to display the product for sale.
“Closed Dating” is a code that consists of a series of letters and/or numbers applied by the manufacturers to identify the date and time of production.
Meat, Poultry and Egg Products

- Meat, poultry and egg products under the jurisdiction of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), dates may be voluntarily applied provided they are labeled in a manner that is truthful and not misleading and in compliance with FSIS regulations.

- To comply, a calendar date must express both the month and day of the month. In the case of shelf stable and frozen products, the year must also be displayed.

- Additionally, immediately adjacent to the date must be a phrase explaining the meaning of that date such as “Best if Used By”.

Food Safety or Quality?

- Manufacturers provide dating to help consumers and retailers decide when food is of best quality.
- Except for infant formula, dates are not an indicator of the product’s safety and are not required by Federal Law.
Factors include the length of time and the temperature at which food is held during distribution and offered for sale.

The characteristics of the food, and the type of packaging will affect how long a product will be of optimum quality.

Manufacturers and retailers will consider these factors when determining the date for which the product will be of the best quality.
Example

- Sausage formulated with ingredients used to preserve the quality of fresh beef packaged in a modified atmosphere packaging system that helps ensure that the product will stay fresh for as long as possible.
- These products will typically maintain product quality for a longer period of time, because of the product formulations and how the product is packaged.
- The quality of PERISHABLE products may deteriorate after the date passes, however products should still be safe if handled properly.
There are no uniform or universally accepted descriptions used on food labels for open dating. As a result there is a wide variety of phrases used on labels to describe quality dates.

“Best if Used By/Before” – indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

“Sell – By” date tells the store how long to display the product for sale for inventory management. It is not a safety date.
“Use –By” date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while a peak quality. It is not a safety date except for when used on infant formula.

The USDA estimates food loss and waste at 30 percent of the food supply. Other estimates include 133 billion pounds of food wasted in the US each year and globally 1.3 billion tons lost or wasted annually.

The Major culprit globally is date label confusion.
A new initiative has an aim to harmonize “use–by” labels around the globe.
This is still a voluntary initiative to streamline date labels.
“Best if Used By “ – describes the quality of a food product. The product “may not taste of perform” its best after the specified date but it is safe to use or consume.
“Use –By” – applies to highly perishable products, and should be consumed by the date listed on the package.
With the exception of infant formula, if a date passes during home storage, a product should still be safe and wholesome if it has been handled properly until the time spoilage is evident. Spoiled food will develop an off flavor, odor or texture due to naturally occurring spoilage bacteria. If a food develops such spoilage characteristics, it should not be eaten.
Food Donation

- The quality of the perishable products may deteriorate after the date passes, but the products should still be wholesome and donated if not exhibiting signs of spoilage.
- Food banks, other charitable organizations and consumers should evaluate the quality of the product prior to distribution and consumption to determine if there are noticeable changes in wholesomeness.
Good Samaritan Food Donation Act promotes food recovery by limiting the liability of donors to instances of gross negligence or intentional misconduct. The Act further states that, absent of gross negligence or intentional misconduct, persons, gleaners, and nonprofit organizations shall not be subject to civil or criminal liability arising from the nature, age, packaging or condition of wholesome food or fit grocery products received as donations. It also establishes basic nationwide uniform definitions pertaining to donation and distribution of nutritious foods and will help ensure that donated foods meet all qualify and labeling standards of Federal, State, and local laws and regulations.
Egg Carton Dates

- Dates are not a federal regulation, but may be required as defined by the egg laws in the state where the eggs are marketed.
- Many eggs reach stores only a few days after the hen lays them. Egg cartons with the USDA grade shield on them must display the “pack-date” the day that the eggs were washed, graded and placed in the carton. This number is a three digit code that represents the consecutive day of the year starting with Jan 1 as 001 and ending with Dec 31 as 365. Sell – By dates appearing on a carton may not exceed 30 days from the pack date.
Confusion over the meaning of dates applied to food products can result in consumers discarding wholesome food.

It is important to help consumers understand that the dates applied to food are for quality and not for safety.

Food products are safe to consume passed the date on the label, and regardless of the date, consumers should evaluate the quality of the food prior to consumption.
Handle food properly.

- If food is mishandled, before or after the date on the package, bacteria (including pathogenic bacteria) can quickly multiply.
- Everyone should pay attention to how food products are handled, including how food is defrosted, handled and stored to maintain product safety and practice good sanitation.
- Follow good food handling and preparation instructions to insure top quality and safety.