

Understanding the difference between “Best Before Dates” & “Expiry Dates”

Knowing the difference can help you save money and waste less food.

EXPIRY DATE

What this looks like on the package:
“EXP” or “Expiry Date”

“Expiry dates” are about safety and nutrient content. There are only a few products that have “expiry dates”, these include:

- Baby Formula
- Meal Replacements or supplement bars
- Formulated liquid diets
- Nutritional supplements
- Medications

Expired food products are not safe to eat or drink because the nutrients in the food may have changed. This means the nutrients listed on the label may no longer match what is in the food product or may pose health risks.

If an “Expiry date” has passed, it is not safe to eat and should be thrown out. This also means that food past the “Expiry date” should not be bought or sold.



BEST BEFORE DATE

What this looks like on the package:
“BB” “BBD” or “Use By”

“Best before dates” give you an idea of when your food is at its best quality. What do we mean by best quality? It means it will have the best:

- Freshness
- Texture
- Flavor
- Nutritional value



If the food is past the “best before date” and it has been stored properly, it may still be safe to eat.

Tips on if a food is safe to eat after the “best before date”:

- **Use your senses.** Does it look or smell different, does it have a strange texture, has its colour changed or do you see mold? These are all signs that food item should not be eaten.
- **Is it a high-risk food, like meat or seafood?** These products grow bacteria as they approach and pass their “best before date”.
- **Make sure the food has been stored properly.** Read the packaging on how best to store it and make sure the container is not damaged.
- **“Best before dates” apply to unopened products only.** Once opened, a food product’s quality may start to decline earlier than what is labelled.

If you are ever unsure if a food is safe to eat, throw it away or compost it.

WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT!

How to read a “best before date”: the date is most often shown as Day-Month-Year.

For example, a Best Before Date of January 4th, 2025, would look like 04 JA 25


What is a “Packaged on” date? “Packaged on” dates are the date an item was packaged.

Foods that have an expected shelf-life of 90 days or more will usually have this label.

You may see this date instead of a “best before date”.



Check out the back for a “best before date” timetable.

Food Category	Unopened Food Item	Eat By
 Produce	Fresh fruits or vegetables in bags or containers	Try to eat within 1-2 days of BBD. Don't eat if moldy, mushy, decaying, or if it has a bad smell.
	Canned fruits and vegetables	1 year past BBD
 Dairy	Perishable milks (including dairy alternatives), butter, yogurt, cheese	2 weeks past BBD If frozen, 2-3 months past their BBD
	Shelf stable evaporated, powdered or milk alternatives	1 year past BBD
 Meat & Fish / Egg / Soy / Legumes / Nut Products & Nuts	Raw meat and fish	BBD or, if frozen <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beef, lamb, pork, whole poultry: 1 year past BBD • Poultry pieces: 6 months past BBD • Ground meat: 2-3 months past BBD • Fish: 2-6 months past BBD
	Deli meats, tofu, eggs	1 week past BBD
	Canned meats, fish, beans, chickpeas, soups. Nut, nut butters, seeds.	1 year past BBD
 Bread / Crackers / Cereal / Grains	Bread, buns, bagels, pita, tortillas, flat breads	Don't eat if moldy, mushy, decaying, or if it has a bad smell.
	Dry cereals, crackers, flour, oats, pasta, rice, quinoa	1 year past BBD
 Baked Goods / Snacks / Desserts	Shelf stable cookies, chips, popcorn, bagged snacks, granola bars	1 year past BBD
	Perishable cakes, cookies, pies, Danishes, pudding	3 days past BBD If frozen, 1 month past BBD
 Prepared	Shelf stable baby food (with no expiry date)	1 year past BBD
	Pre-cooked or ready-to-go meals including sandwiches, pizza, salads	3 days past BBD If frozen, 1 month past BBD
	Frozen dinners, microwavable meals	1 year past BBD
 Condiments	Shelf stable mustard, ketchup, relish, mayonnaise, oil, salad dressing, vinegar, spices, sauce, toppings	1 year past BBD
 Beverages	Water, juice, coffee, tea, sports/energy drinks, crystals	3-6 months past BBD

Reference: Second Harvest, food rescue charity in Canada. (n.d.). <https://www.secondharvest.ca/>

BBD = Best Before Date

