



A Matter of Time

Best before dates are probably not what you thought they were

Most of us know that we don't really understand much of the information on food labels. Many of us don't know what the data in the Nutrition Facts Box means or how to use it to make meaningful food choices. In fact, a lot of information on the food label is often confusing to anyone who isn't a dietitian. The exception is the "best before date." Food is safe before that date and unsafe afterwards, and at least that, we think, is clear. Think again.

When a prepackaged product having a durable life of 90 days or less is packaged at a place other than the retail premises from which it is sold, the food's label must show in English and French the durable life date and provide instructions for proper storage if it requires storage conditions that differ from normal room temperature. The durable life date is expressed on food labels as the "best before date." For example, JA 15. Retail packed food with a durable life of 90 days or less may be labelled with either a durable life date or a packaging date and accompanying durable life information on the label or on a poster next to the food.

Several food items are exempted from the regulation, such as prepackaged fresh fruit and vegetables, including the chopped or shredded fresh fruit and vegetables that are now so common. Prepackaged individual portions of food served by restaurants and airlines, or individual servings of foods prepared by a commissary and sold in automatic vending machines or mobile canteens, are also exempt, as are prepackaged doughnuts.

The lack of clarity comes from the definition of "durable life" and "packaging date." According to the Food and Drugs Regulations, durable life "means the period, commencing on the day on which a prepackaged product is packaged for retail sale during which the product, when stored under conditions appropriate to that product, will retain, without any appreciable deterioration, its normal wholesomeness, palatability, nutritional value and any other qualities claimed for it by the manufacturer." While "wholesomeness" is related to food safety, the durable life has really more to do with the food quality. There are no rules on how to establish durable life for products, so this

is a matter to be determined by the manufacturer, and there is a lot of discretion. Also, the date is only valid for unopened products. Foods can also be unsafe within the best before date and perfectly safe months after the best before date. Unfortunately, while using your senses (sight and smell) and your common sense can be helpful, spoilage is not a perfect guide to safety. Most people will not become ill from consuming spoiled food, and at the same time, foods that contain dangerous amounts of *Salmonella*, *E. coli* 0157:H7, *Campylobacter* and *Listeria monocytogenes*, for example, can cause serious foodborne illness, but may still smell and look fine. Note, as well, that if in the opinion of the manufacturer, the shelf life exceeds 90 days, there is no requirement for any "best before date." There appears to be no standard or scientific basis for the determination of what is a durable date or a reasonable shelf life for products.

Even more difficult issues arise with retail-packed product. "Packaging date" means "the date on which a food is packed for the first time in a package in which it will be offered for sale to a consumer." A roast can be packaged by a butcher or a grocer with the best before date at the retailer's discretion. While the law is clear that you can't sell food that is putrid or unsafe, there is no labelling law that prevents the retailer from cutting up the roast at the end of the best before date and re-selling it with a new best before date as stewing beef, or re-packaging it again as ground beef. Your chicken shish kabob packaged yesterday may have been chicken breasts packaged last week and no labelling law has been broken.

Follow storage and cooking instructions carefully, always follow safe food handling procedures and think of best before dates primarily as just a guide to food quality. Confusion about the meaning of best before dates may be a small contributing factor to the 35,000 cases of foodborne illness suffered by Canadians every day of the year.

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