



## Best before and packaging dates... confusing times

By Ronald Doering

While much of the data on food labels is incomprehensible to the average consumer, at least “best before dates” and “packaging dates” are easy to understand and provide valuable information on food safety. Right? Wrong.

According to B.01.007 of the *Food and Drugs Regulations*, when a pre-packaged 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 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 to be expressed on food labels as the “best before date” using standardized bilingual symbols. So, for example, this Dec. 15 would appear as 12 DE 15.

But now it gets a little confusing. Durable life is defined as “the period, commencing on the day on which a pre-packaged 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 it is true that “wholesomeness” is related to food safety, the durable life is really more to do with food quality. There are no rules on how to establish durable life for products, so this is a matter at the sole discretion of the manufacturer, and the date is only valid for unopened products. Many foods could be unsafe within the best before date and others perfectly safe for years after the best before date.

Even more confusing, if in the opinion of the manufacturer the shelf life exceeds 90 days, there is no requirement for any best before date. However, manufacturers now use them anyway for their own traceability purposes, so we have so-called best before dates on canned and other packaged products that can be safely on a shelf for years. Is it any wonder that a consumer is confused by a best before date on the bottom of a can that is five years away? This information says very little about quality and nothing about safety.

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. Many food items are specifically exempted from the regulation, such as pre-packaged fresh fruit and vegetables, including the chopped vegetables and pre-packaged salads that are so common today and have been the source of much foodborne illness in recent years. Foods prepared by a commissary and sold in automatic vending machines or mobile canteens are also exempt, even though they would have a higher food safety risk.

Retail-packed products also require



a “packaging date,” and there are definitional problems here as well. “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, for example, 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 cannot 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 its best before date and reselling 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 and packaging dates primarily as rough guides to food quality. They do not provide reliable information on food safety. ●

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