



## Product Dating Background

Most people wonder, “How long can I keep a product after the product date has passed?” The answers to this question depend on a number of factors. Some are simple, others are complicated.

There is no uniform or universally accepted system used for food dating in the United States. Dates and codes usually indicate the timeframe in which the product is at peak quality and freshness or the date it was manufactured or packaged. They are also a good reference point for determining additional shelf life.

Based on Commonwealth regulations and best practices at The Greater Boston Food Bank, there are three main points all agencies should understand and follow. They are:

**1. You cannot distribute out of date perishable products to your clients.**

No products requiring refrigeration can be distributed to clients past the **expiration, use, sell or pull by dates** due to the possible growth of pathogens that can cause foodborne illness. We do not distribute packaged perishable products without code dates. Produce is typically neither packaged nor dated. We will continue to distribute produce in good condition.

*Source: Commonwealth regulation 105 CMR 520.119 (I)-(J) and GBFB Nutrition Department*

**2. There are two exceptions to this rule:**

- i. GBFB occasionally freezes perishable meats before the code date expires. You may distribute this to clients under two conditions:
  - The product is distributed frozen within 6 months of the date stamp, and
  - Clients are told to eat the entire product within 24 hours of thawing.
- ii. General Mills provides extended use-by dates to Feeding America to allow safe and wholesome food to be distributed to those in need. The guidelines, which are outlined in the official General Mills letter, should only be applied to General Mills products.

**3. You can distribute non-perishable products (shelf stable) that are past the date indicated on their package.**

In order to do so, you must separate the out-of-date product from all other product within the freshness code and/or post proper signage that these products are being offered after the recommended last date of sale or best use. To help you and your clients gauge what an appropriate time frame is for consumption of perishable and non-perishable foods, The Greater Boston Food Bank is providing you with some reference tools to make this process easier.

*Source: Commonwealth regulation, section 520.119 (F)*

Please note that if you have any concerns about the product’s integrity or food safety, err on the side of caution. **Remember: When in Doubt, Throw it Out!**



## Product Dating Definitions and Examples

**Perishable Food** is a food product having an estimated shelf life of 60 days or less.  
Examples: strawberries, salad mix, milk

**Shelf Life** is a period of time after the date of packaging during which a food product has no significant risk of spoilage, loss of value or loss of palatability given compliance with recommended conditions of storage and handling as disclosed on the label.

**Closed or Coded Dates** appear as a series of letters and/or numbers created by the manufacturer. Closed or coded dates enable manufacturers to rotate their stock, locate their products in the event of a recall and refer to the date, location or time of manufacture. This dating format is not meant for the consumer to use. There is no book which tells how to translate the codes into dates.

Example: canned foods

**Open Dating** refers to using calendar dates on products. Open dating helps stores decide how long to display a product for sale. It can also help consumers know when to purchase or use the product at its best quality. This is not a safety date. Classifications of open dating are:

- **Use By or Expiration Date:** indicates the last date suggested for use of the product in terms of quality or freshness.  
Example: refrigerated biscuits and rolls
- **Sell or Pull By Date:** indicates the last day the product is recommended for display on a supermarket shelf.  
Example: meat, bread
- **Best If Used By or Before Date:** indicates how long the product will retain peak quality or flavor – it is still safe to eat after this date, but may have changed somewhat in taste or texture.  
Example: juice boxes, shelf stable milk, cereal

**Dates on 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). The number is a three-digit code that represents the consecutive day of the year (the "Julian Date") starting with January 1 as 001 and ending with December 31 as 365. When a "sell-by" date appears on a carton bearing the USDA grade shield, the code date may not exceed 30 days from the date of pack.

### References:

- *Food Safety and Inspection Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington D.C. 20250-3700, February 2007*
- *The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Public Health Food Protection Program*
- *Food Marketing Institute*