**Shelf Life of Food Bank Products**

**By NDSU Extension**

**Adapted from the** **Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank**

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For more resources visit www.ag.ndsu.edu/food

# **Introduction**

We were pleased to find the original guide developed by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. We appreciate their efforts in making this information available. We have updated the food storage information and references to provide the most recent information we have available.

North Dakota State University Extension has county-based office personnel that work with community partners, including food pantries, throughout North Dakota. See <https://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension> to learn more about the role of NDSU Extension, including the Family and Community Wellness (FCW), EFNEP and SNAP-Ed programs. See [www.ag.ndsu.edu/food](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/food) to explore a wide range of information to help make use of foods.

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**How to use this guide**

This guide provides a brief introduction about how manufacturers use dates to code their food for purchase. Then, the guide offers a series of charts that provide guidance on how long different foods can be safely consumed past the date stamped on the packaging. The foods listed in this guide are organized according to the following categories:

* **Explanation of Package Code Dates**: Few products have a set expiration date. Find out what the dates on your packages really mean.
* **Examining Cans and Boxes for Safety**: When is a package too damaged to be safe?
* **Shelf-stable Foods** include foodsthat can be stored at room temperature before opening. This category includes unopened baby foods, condiments, canned goods and dry goods.
* **Shelf-stable Beverages** include juices, soda, water and other drinks designed to be stored at room temperature until opening. Do not confuse these items with beverages that must be kept refrigerated.
* **Foods Purchased Refrigerated**: This category includes beverages that must be kept cold. Many of these items can be frozen after purchase to increase their storage time. This guide indicates how long an item can be expected to keep in the refrigerator or freezer.
* **Foods Purchased Frozen** include foods that would be found in the freezer section of a grocery store. These foods should be stored frozen until they are to be used and should be pulled only as needed for immediate distribution.
* **Fresh Meats:** This includes meats distributed frozen through the food bank. These meats were frozen on or before the sell-by date marked on each package. Meats will keep indefinitely when they remain solidly frozen and are stored at freezer temperatures and retain their quality best if properly packaged. They should be pulled from the freezer only as needed for immediate distribution.
* **Prepared Foods** include prepared dips, side dishes, salads, etc. These items are sometimes available from a cooler at the Food Bank, or may be available through other donation streams. These items are generally perishable, and you should pay close attention to how long the best by date can be extended safely.
* **Fresh Produce** shelf life involves many factors, making it very challenging to provide a reliable timeline for how long certain items will be good. However, we have provided some tips for how to store certain items for longest life and best flavor.

# **What do the dates on food packages mean?**

The only foods that are required by federal law to have expiration dates are baby food and infant formula. The Food Bank does not distribute most baby food past its expiration date. However, some products designed for babies such as juice and cookies or biscuits can be distributed past their date and are safe to eat.

Many canned and boxed products are safe to eat long after the date on the container. Further, the shelf life of refrigerated and frozen foods can be extended if they are handled properly. Once a perishable item is frozen, the expiration date does not matter. Foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely, though the quality slowly deteriorates over time. For this reason, listing the “freezing date” on the package is a good practice. Here are some code dates you may see on food packages:

**Expiration Date** (Examples: Expires 11/15/24 or Do not use after 11/15/24)

* **Look for it on:** Baby food and formula, yeast, baking powder.
* **What it means:** Do not distribute infant formula or baby food after the expiration date. Yeast and baking powder work less well after expiration but are safe to eat.

**Pack Date** (Examples: Packed on 03/01/2024 or 22:5306424 or KL064)

* **Look for it on:** Canned food, crackers, cookies, spices.
* **What it means:** This is the date the food was packaged. A code is often used that cannot be understood by the general public, often numbering days sequentially such that January 1 is day 001 and December 31 is day 365 (366 in leap years). Usually, this food is of good quality and safe to eat for a time past the date.

**Sell-By Date** (Example: Sell by January 1, 2024. Also called **Pull Date**)

* **Look for it on:** Refrigerated foods such as milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, eggs, lunch meat, packaged salad mixes and other foods.
* **What it means:** The store must sell these foods before the code date listed and often donates these foods when they are close to date. If the food has been handled properly, it is still safe to eat and the quality is good. Food Bank staff monitors this food to ensure that the quality remains good.

**Use-By or Quality Date** (Examples: Best if used by 1/1/24 or Use Before 1/1/24)

* **Look for it on:** Crackers, cookies, cold cereals, and other dry, shelf-stable food.
* **What it means:** This date is the manufacturer’s recommendation for how long the food will be at peak quality. After the quality date, the food is still safe to eat but slowly begins to lose nutrients and the quality begins to lessen.

# **Shelf-stable product**

Most shelf-stable or dry foods (cans, boxes, bags) remain edible for several days, months or even years past their code date. Always examine the packaging to make sure it has not been damaged extensively, making the food unsafe to eat.

## Do not consume food from cans or jars if any of these are true of the container or food:

* Leaking or stained
* Swollen
* Rusty
* Badly dented, crimped or pinched
* Cracked
* Foul odor
* Broken or missing safety seals
* Loose or missing lids
* Foods exhibit changed color or odor. Do not taste suspicious foods.

## Do not consume food from boxes:

## If the inner bag:

* + Is torn or leaking.
  + Has moldy or foreign objects inside.
  + Seals are ripped.

## If the box without an inside bag:

* + Is open or torn.
  + Has live or dead insects, webs or droppings.
  + Is stained or wet.

# **Tips on storing canned and boxed food:**

* Store cans and boxes off the floor, either on a pallet or shelf and 18 inches away from the outer wall so air can circulate. This will help with cleaning, monitoring condensation and wall temperatures that could affect food safety and quality.
* Store canned and boxed goods in a clean, dry and cool area. A temperature range of 50 to 70⁰F storage temperature can help maximize shelf life.
* Extremely hot (over 100⁰F) and cold (below 30⁰F) temperatures can damage canned goods and shorten shelf life.
* Always rotate your stock – first in – first out. Distribute or use older products before newer ones.

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| **Shelf-Stable Foods** | **Shelf Life from Date of Purchase** |
| **Baby Food** |  |
| Cereal, dry mixes | Use by date |
| Food in jars, cans | Use by date |
| Formula prepared | Use by date |
| **Canned Foods** |  |
| Ham | 6-9 months |
| High-acid foods   * fruit (including applesauce, juices) * pickles, sauerkraut * baked beans w/mustard/vinegar * tomatoes, tomato-based soups & sauces | 12-18 months |
| Low-acid foods   * gravy, soups, meat, fish * pasta, stews * vegetables (not tomatoes) | 2-5 years |
| Meat Products | 5 years |
| **Aseptically-packaged Products** |  |
| Broth: beef or chicken commercially produced | Use by date |
| Milk ultra-pasteurized | 1-3 months |
| **Condiments, Sauces and Syrups** |  |
| Barbecue sauce, bottled | 1 year |
| Gravy, dry mix envelopes | 2 years |
| Honey | 2 years |
| Jams, jellies, preserves | 6-18 months |
| Ketchup, cocktail, or chili sauce | 1 year |
| Mayonnaise | 3-6 months |
| Molasses | 1-2 years |
| Mustard | 1-2 years |
| Olives, black and green | 12-18 months |
| Pickles | 1 year |
| Salad dressings, bottled | 10-12 months |
| Salsa picante and taco sauces | 1 year |

Source: FoodSafety.gov

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| **Shelf-Stable Foods (Continued)** | **Shelf Life from Date of Purchase** |
| **Condiments, Sauces, Syrups (Continued)** |  |
| Spaghetti and pizza sauce, canned | Use by date |
| Spaghetti sauce, jarred | 18 months |
| Syrup, chocolate | 2 years |
| Syrup, corn | 3 years |
| Syrup | 1 year |
| Vinegar | 2 years |
| Worcestershire sauce | 1 year |
| **Dry Goods** |  |
| Baking mix, pancake or biscuit | 9 months |
| Baking mixes: brownie, cake, bread, | 12-18 months |
| Baking powder | 6-18 months |
| Baking soda | 2-3 years |
| Beans, dried | 1-2 years |
| Bouillon, dry | 1 year |
| Bread, commercially prepared (including rolls) | 14-18 days |
| Cakes, commercially prepared | 3-7 days |
| Cereal, ready to eat | 6-12 months |
| Cereal, cook before eating | 1 year |
| Cornmeal regular, degerminated | 6-12 months |
| Crackers | 8 months  Except graham crackers, 6-9 months |
| Flour, white (all purpose or cake) | 6-12 months |
| Flour, whole wheat | 3-6 months   6-8 months if refrigerated after opening |
| Fruit, dried | 6 months |
| Nuts, jars or cans | 1 year |
| Oatmeal | 1 year |
| Oil: olive or vegetable | 6-12 months |
| Pasta, dry (egg noodles) | 2 years |
| Pasta, dry (no egg) | 2 years |

Source: FoodSafety.gov

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| **Shelf-Stable Foods (Continued)** | **Shelf Life from Date of Purchase** |
| **Dry Goods (Continued)** |  |
| Peanut butter | 6-24 months |
| Popcorn, kernels | 2 years |
| Popcorn, commercially popped in bags | 2-3 months |
| Popcorn, microwave packets | 6-12 months |
| Potato chips | 2 months or use by date |
| Potatoes, instant | 10-15 months |
| Pretzels | 4-9 months |
| Rice, brown | 1 year |
| Rice, white or wild | 2 years |
| Shortening, solid | 1-2 years |
| Spices | 3-4 years for whole spices   2-3 years for ground spices |
| Dry stuffing mix | 9-12 months |
| Sugar, brown (light or dark) | Indefinitely |
| Sugar, confectioners | Indefinitely |
| Sugar, granulated | Indefinitely |
| Sugar substitutes | 2 years |
| Toaster pastries | 6-12 months |
| Tortillas | 3 months for flour tortillas   25-45 days for corn tortillas |

Source: FoodSafety.gov

The following information applies only to shelf-stable beverages. Juices and milk products requiring refrigeration are covered in the next section, along with other refrigerated items.

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| **Shelf-Stable Beverages** | **Shelf Life from Date of Purchase** |
| Cocoa mixes | Indefinitely |
| Coffee creamer, powdered | 2 years |
| Coffee, commercial ground non vacuum | 2 years |
| Coffee, instant | 1 year |
| Coffee, whole bean | 3-5 months |
| Instant breakfast drinks, bottled | 6 months |
| Juice, box | Use by date |
| Milk, canned, evaporated or condensed | 1 year |
| Nutritional supplement drinks, bottled | Use by date |
| Tea, bagged | 18-36 months |
| Tea, instant | 2-3 years |
| Tea, loose leaf | 2 years |
| Water commercially bottled | Indefinitely |

Source: FoodSafety.gov

# **Tips on Storing Refrigerated Food:**

* Keep all chilled food refrigerated at 40⁰F or below until distribution.
* Store eggs in their original carton.
* Leave space for air to circulate between items in the refrigerator.
* Rotate stock so that older foods are distributed first.

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| Dairy and Cooler Items | Refrigerated (40°F or below) | Frozen (0°F or below) |
| Butter | 1-2 months | 6-9 months |
| Buttermilk | 1-2 weeks | 3 months |
| Cheese, cottage | 2 weeks | Not Recommended |
| Cheese, cream | 2 weeks | Not Recommended |
| Cheese, hard | 6 months | 6 months |
| Cheese, soft | 1-2 weeks | 6 months |
| Cheese, processed slices | 3-4 weeks | Not Recommended |
| Coffee creamer, liquid refrigerated | 3 weeks |  |
| Cream, half & half | 3-4 days | 4 months |
| Cream, heavy | 10 days | 3-4 months |
| Crust, pie, refrigerated | Use by date | 2 months |
| Dips, made with sour cream | 2 weeks | Not Recommended |
| Dough, biscuit fridge | Use by date | Not Recommended |
| Dough, tube cans | Use by date | Not Recommended |
| Dough, cookie | Use by date | 2 months |
| Eggs, in shell | 3-5 weeks | Not Recommended |
| Egg substitute, liquid | 7 days | Not Recommended |
| Margarine | 6 months | 12 months |
| Milk, plain or flavored | Use by date \*(7 days after use   by date if continually   refrigerated) | 3 months |
| Milk, rice | Use by date | Not Available |
| Milk, soy | Use by date | Not Available |
| Pudding | Use by date | Not Recommended |
| Sour cream | Use by date | Not Recommended |
| Whipped cream, aerosol | 3-4 weeks | Not Recommended |
| Whipped topping, aerosol | 3 months | Not Recommended |
| Whipped topping,   tub | 2 weeks | 14 months |
| Yogurt | 1-2 weeks | 1-2 months |

Source: FoodSafety.gov and \*stilltasty.com

# **Tips on Storing Frozen Food:**

* If food remains continuously frozen, it will last much longer than if it is exposed to changing temperatures. Keep all frozen food at 0⁰F or below until distribution.
* Leave meat, poultry and seafood in the original packaging when distributing. It is unsafe to open and repack these foods.

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| Items Purchased Frozen | Frozen (0°F or below) |
| Bread, bagels | 3 months |
| Dough, bread | 1 year |
| Dough, cookie | 1 year |
| Egg substitutes | 1 year |
| Entrée, frozen/prepared meal | 1 year |
| Fish, breaded | 18 months |
| Ice pops | 9 months |
| Fruit such as berries, melons | 10-18 months |
| Ice cream | 6 months |
| Juice concentrates | 2 years |
| Soy meat substitutes | 12-18 months |
| Vegetables, frozen | 10-18 months |
| Waffles, pancakes | 3 months |

Source: FoodSaffety.gov

Meats distributed through the Food Bank should be completely frozen, and stored at 0°F or lower for as long as possible before distribution. Do not leave meats at room temperature.

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| Meats, Fresh | Refrigerated (40°F or below) | Frozen (0°F or below) |
| Fish/ Seafood, Raw |  |  |
| Fatty fish:  salmon, mackerel, tuna, bluefish | 1-2 days | 2-3 months |
| Lean fish:  cod, flounder, haddock, halibut, sole | 1-2 days | 6-8 months |
| Shrimp crayfish, raw | 1-3 days | 6-18 months |
| Crab, legs | 2-4 days | 9-12 months |
| Oysters, shucked | 3-10 days | 3-4 months |
| Lobster, fresh whole live | 1 day | Not Recommended |
| Scallops, raw | 1-3 days | 6-18 months |
| Meats, Raw |  | |
| Beef roasts | 3-5 days | 4-12 months |
| Beef steaks | 3-5 days | 4-12 months |
| Pork roasts | 3-5 days | 4-12 months |
| Pork chops | 3-5 days | 4-12 months |
| Lamb roasts | 3-5 days | 4-12 months |
| Lamb chops | 3-5 days | 4-12 months |
| Whole chicken or turkey | 1-2 days | 1 year |
| Ground meats:  beef, pork, lamb | 1-2 days | 3-4 months |
| Meats, Processed |  | |
| Bacon | 1 week | 1 month |
| Chicken, fried | 3-4 days | 4 months |
| Chicken, nuggets/patties |  | 1-3 months |
| Ham, deli | 2 weeks | 1-2 months |
| Hot dogs | 2 weeks | 1-2 months |
| Luncheon meats, deli-sliced | 3-5 days | 1-2 months |
| Luncheon meats, commercial package | 2 weeks | 1-2 months |
| Pepperoni, salami sliced | 2-3 weeks | 1-2 months |
| Sausage, raw and frozen | 3-4 days | 1-2 months |
| Sausage, smoked links fully cooked,   kielbasa | 1 week | 1-2 months |

Source: FoodSafety.gov

Prepared foods should be kept refrigerated until distributed. These foods are perishable, and leaving them at room temperature will shorten their shelf life.

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| Prepared Items/ Deli Foods | Refrigerated (40°F or below) | Frozen (0°F or below) |
| Fruit, cut | Use by date | Not Recommended |
| Guacamole | 3-4 days | 3-4 months |
| Hummus, pasteurized with preservatives | 3 months | Not Recommended |
| Hummus, no preservatives | 7 days | Not Recommended |
| Meats in gravy or broth | 3-4 days | 6 months |
| Pasta, fresh | 1-2 days | 2 months |
| Salads, prepared: egg, chicken, tuna | 3-4 days | Not Recommended |
| Soups, stews | 3-4 days | 2-3 months |
| Spinach, salad greens (bagged) | 3-5 days | Not Recommended |

Source: FoodSafety.gov

# **Tips on Storing Fresh Produce:**

Most fruits and vegetables have the best quality when kept refrigerated. There are, however, some exceptions:

* + Tomatoes taste best if not refrigerated. Cold storage can cause them to become mealy.
  + Bananas should not be refrigerated unless fully ripe, and then they should be used within 1-2 days. Refrigeration will cause banana skin to blacken, but the fruit will not ripen while cold.
  + Fresh apples, mangoes and stone fruits (plums, peaches, etc.) can be stored at room temperature, but these items should be refrigerated as they ripen.
  + Hardy vegetables like onions, garlic, potatoes, sweet potatoes and winter squash can be stored in cool, dark places outside of the cooler.

# Sources

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