

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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What the Dates Really Mean

Have you ever looked at the date on a food package and wondered: "Okay, is this still safe? How long can I keep it? What does this date really mean?" If so, you are not alone! There are actually four different kinds of dates that might be on your package, so let's take a look at each of them and what they mean for you.

The one that is most intimidating, and that really means almost nothing to us, is the **Pack Date**. This is often a code, a string of numbers and letters that seem to make no sense. To the manufacturer though, it reports the day and often the time, the plant and often which piece of equipment in the plant, where that can or box was packaged. It tells us nothing about how long the food is safe or good quality. It can be important if you have a problem or complaint for the manufacturer. If you find a spoiled can, something in the box that doesn't belong there, or some other problem, then being able to give the manufacturer that code will help them determine where and how the problem occurred. It can help them protect other people from the same problem as well. If there is food recall, this is often the number you have to look for on a package.

The **Sell by...** date might be the one we most often see. This one will be on milk and dairy products, baked goods, fresh meats and fish and occasionally other foods as well. This is the last date that the manufacturer wants you to buy the food. It is the date the grocery store must take the food off the shelf and out of sale. If you find foods that are past their Sell By dates, report them to the store manager.

But, the store and the manufacturer both want you to be satisfied with the food and to be safe after you have bought it. Food is safe from 2 to 7 days after a Sell By date. If you buy it on the Sell By date, remember to use it promptly. If you buy meat and freeze it, remember that you must use it as soon as you thaw it. You can't expect it to stay good for another week in the refrigerator then!

Then there is the **Use by...** date. This is the last date the manufacturer is willing to guarantee that their product will be top quality. For example, a cake mix used after that date on the package might not rise correctly or might have a rancid odor. Yeast or baking powder might not work right in the bread dough. If you find a use by date on a can, the contents might be soft, or less colorful. But again, the food will probably be safe for quite some time after the date. It depends on the product. Canned milk might be thick or brown, but it won't hurt you. Peaches might be tan instead of yellow, green beans mushier than usual, but it won't hurt you to use them.

Finally there are the **Expiration date...** numbers. These are the ones you really need to pay attention to. If a package says Expiration date..., or Expired after..., or Do Not Use After..., Don't Use It! Expiration dates on infant formula mean the baby will not get all the nutrition it needs from that product. Medicine won't work correctly or might have other side effects after that date. These are safety problems. Yeast and baking powder probably won't rise after their expiration dates. They won't be unsafe, but they could ruin your baking project.

One last point needs to be made. All of these dates assume that you are taking proper care of the food products. If you store canned goods in a hot garage, they will lose their quality much faster than usual. They could become poor quality months

before the date on the can. If you store foods in glass jars in an area of bright lights they will lose their color much more rapidly. Storing boxes of dry foods such as pancake mix in a moist area can lead to lumps, mold or rancidity long before the date on the box. To store foods for top quality, they need to be in cool, dark, dry places. Pay attention to them now, and they'll be good for much longer into the future.

Here's a recipe that uses canned milk and corn. Using canned milk instead of fresh helps stiffen the dish because of the extra protein it has. Use half Mexicali corn with added peppers for a flavor and color boost.

Scalloped Corn

1 large egg, or egg substitute	1 medium onion, chopped
2 Tbst evaporated milk	1 Tbsp margarine
2 cans cream-style corn, or 1 cream-style and 1 can drained whole kernel corn	
pinch of sugar or sweetener if desired	1/4 tsp ground pepper

Preheat oven to 350°F. Spray a baking dish with pan spray. Beat egg until smooth in large bowl. Add other ingredients except margarine and mix well. Pour into baking dish. Dot with margarine. Bake 1 hour, until top is lightly browned. Serves 6.

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