

Storage and Handling of Commercially Packaged Foods

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Proper selection of foods at the grocery store and appropriate storage and handling practices at home are necessary to maintain the quality and safety of commercially processed foods and perishable foods. When foods are improperly handled or stored, bacteria can grow, causing the product to spoil quickly or be unsafe to eat—regardless of the expiration date on the package.



Commercially processed foods are usually found stored on grocery store shelves and include foods that:

- Have been heat treated.
- Are canned or packaged in bottles, flexible pouches, bags, or boxes.
- Are packaged by a commercial processor, not an individual in a private home.
- Are “shelf stable,” meaning they can be stored at room temperature until ready to use.

Packaged, perishable foods are those that spoil quickly if not stored at a refrigerated temperature of 40 degrees or lower, promptly after their purchase. They include:

- Cooked or uncooked meat, poultry, fish, dairy, eggs and their products.
- Pre-prepared, cooked dishes purchased from the grocery deli or meals section, such as vegetables, pasta, rice, potatoes, etc.

Following are some guidelines to follow when buying, handling, and storing packaged foods.

At the Grocery Store

- Inspect packaging for damage, stains, and leakage.
- Do not purchase canned goods with body or seam-side dents, visible rust, or bulges at the top or bottom.
- Do not purchase jars with visible cracks.
- Do not purchase packaged meats, poultry, dairy products, or eggs with off-odors or disagreeable appearances. Never purchase cracked eggs.
- Check package dates and purchase products before the “use-by” or “best-by” date.



Food Product Dating: What Does It All Mean?

Consumers rely on product dating to determine when to purchase or use a product. The quality of nearly all food products tends to decline after manufacturing to a point where the product is no longer acceptable to the consumer. Food manufacturers determine the dates during which the food product will be at an acceptable level of quality (i.e., best texture, appearance, aroma, and flavor) under normal storage conditions. These dates are NOT an indication of product safety.

Except for infant formula and some baby foods, food companies are not required by federal law to date their products, though some state regulations do require them for certain products. Even so, many companies include them to assist consumers.



- “Sell-by” date: tells the store how long it can display the product for sale.
- “Best-if-used-by” date: tells the consumer how long the product will be at its best flavor or quality.
- “Use-by” date: tells the consumer the last date recommended for using the product while at its peak quality and flavor. These dates are required on infant formula and some baby foods.
- “Closed or coded”: packing codes used by manufacturers to help track the product; they do not relate to product freshness or quality.

Commercially processed foods such as canned products and other packaged goods can be suitable for eating after the sell-by or best-by date if they have been handled and stored properly—though their quality may have diminished. If products have not been stored or handled properly, then they may not be suitable for consumption and should be discarded.

The following are practices that consumers should follow in order to properly store and handle their commercially packaged products after bringing them home:

Canned and Store-bought Packaged Goods

- Store in a dry, cool place (50 degrees to 70 degrees) like kitchen cabinets, and away from warm places, such as above a stove, range, or furnace.
- Do not store in a garage or crawl space due to extreme hot and cold temperatures that can speed deterioration and affect taste and appearance.
- Do not store foods under a sink where packaged foods can absorb moisture from the humidity. Canned goods will rust and cause products to leak and spoil. Boxed/dry foods can absorb moisture, resulting in caked and stale products.
- In general, canned vegetables, vegetable soups, meat, poultry, and fish can be stored from two years to five years. Canned fruits, tomatoes, tomato soup, and juices can be stored from 12 months to 18 months.
- Once a can or package is opened, the product starts to spoil. Transfer any unused portions (i.e., canned milk or juice) into clean, tightly covered containers and refrigerate.
- Read the label for additional storage and handling instructions. Look for the words “keep refrigerated” or “refrigerate after opening” to know whether the product should be refrigerated.

Packaged Perishable and Refrigerated Foods

- Keep at refrigerated temperatures of 40 degrees or below.
- Purchase meat and poultry products before the “sell-by” date has expired. Cook or freeze if you cannot use them within one or two days after purchase. Frozen products will last longer than the dates indicated on the package. Cook frozen product as soon as it thaws. Read the “safe-handling label” for cooking and storage information.



Guidelines for Storage of Some Commercially Canned, Packaged and Perishable Foods

If product has a “use-by” date, follow that date; if product has a “sell-by” date or no date, cook or freeze the product within the times indicated on this chart.

Product	Pantry or room storage (unopened)	Refrigerator storage (opened, 40 F)	Freezer storage (0 F)
Canned, jar, or plastic (shelf-stable)			
Baby food – jars	1–2 yrs	1–3 days	
Coffee – cans	2 yrs (2–4 wks opened)	2 mos	6 mos
Fish	1 yr	1–2 days	
Fruits, fruit juices	1 yr	3–5 days	1–2 mos (opened)
Ham	2 yrs	3–5 days	
Mayonnaise	2–3 mos	2 mos	
Meat, poultry	2–5 yrs	3–4 days	4–6 wks (opened)
Peanut butter	6–9 mos (2–3 mos opened)	4–6 mos	
Vegetable soup	1 yr	3–4 days	2–3 mos (opened)
Vegetables	1 yr	3–5 days	1–2 mos (opened)
Meats/poultry			
Beef – fresh ground		1–2 days*	3–4 mos
Beef – fresh steaks, roasts		3–5 days*	6–12 mos
Chicken – fresh parts		1–2 days*	9 mos
Chicken – fresh whole		1–2 days*	1 yr
Ham – fully cooked whole		1 wk*	1–2 mos
Hot dogs, lunch meats		3–7 days (2 wks unopened)	1–2 mos
Pork – fresh chops		3–5 days*	4–6 mos
Dairy			
Butter		1–3 mos	6–9 mos
Cheese – hard (i.e., cheddar, swiss)		3–4 wks (3–6 mos unopened)	6 mos
Cheese – processed		3–4 wks	6–8 mos
Cheese – soft		1 wk	6 mos
Milk		8–20 days	3 mos
Eggs			
Fresh, in shell		3–5 wks	
Hard boiled		1 wk	
Pasteurized liquid		3 days (10 days unopened)	1 yr
Seafood			
Fish – fresh, lean fillets		1–2 days	6–10 mos
Oysters, clams – shucked		4–5 days	3 mos
Shrimp – fresh		4 days	3–6 mos
Other packaged foods			
Breads – purchased	5–7 days	1–2 wks	2–3 mos
Cake mixes	6–9 mos		
Cereals – ready-to-eat	1 yr (2–3 mos opened)		
Herbs – dried; spices – ground	6 mos		1–2 yrs
Flour – white	6–8 mos	1 yr	1–2 yrs
Fruit – pre-cut, fresh		2–4 days	2–3 mos
Nutritional supplements – adult	As stated on the container	2 days	
Salads – pre-cut, bagged		2 days (10–14 days unopened)	

* Or by the date on the package.

- If product has a “use-by” date, follow that date (unless you freeze the product).
- Pasteurized milk should remain edible for two days to five days after its “sell-by” date if it has been stored at refrigerated temperatures below 40 degrees.
- Eggs can be used three weeks to five weeks after reaching home if they have been properly stored (below 40 degrees). The “sell-by” date is usually 45 days from the date eggs were packed by the producer.
- Cook or freeze seafood, such as fresh fish, shrimp, and crab, within one day to two days after purchase.

Use the Guidelines for Storage of Some Commercially Canned, Packaged, and Perishable Foods chart included here for more information.

What if the Product Date Expires During Home Storage?

If the product date has expired, and the product has been handled and stored properly, then evaluate the product before potential use, following these guidelines:

- Don’t use or taste any product with an off-odor or appearance or from any container that spurts liquid when opening.
- Discard cans that leak or are severely dented, bulging, or rusted; discard jars with cracks or loose or bulging lids.
- Discard packages that are broken, damaged, leaking, stained, or have the presence of mold or insects.
- Discard meat, poultry, dairy items, and egg products that show signs of spoilage such as off-odors, slime, color changes, or mold.
- Eggs’ “sell-by” date may expire during refrigerated storage, but the eggs can be safe to use if they have been stored at refrigerated temperatures below 40 degrees.
- Use baby formula and baby foods by the “use-by” date to ensure the product still meets the nutritional and quality standards stated on the label. Discard after this date.

For more information, go to: www.ext.vt.edu.

Sources:

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This publication does not include information on foods canned at home. For more information on home canning, refer to *Preserving Foods at Home*, Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 348-027. <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/348-027/>.