



Shelf Life of Food Bank Products

Community Foodbank of NJ often distributes food items after the date on the package. This food is still safe to eat! Food manufacturers use different date codes to ensure that consumers receive their product at peak quality. Once a product is past code date, many manufacturers donate it to food banks. Food Bank staff monitors this food to ensure that the quality remains good. This provides a reference for the “shelf life” of this product, or how long these foods are good past code date.

How to use this guide:

The first section of the guide provides a brief introduction to how manufacturers use dates to code their food for purchase. Then, the guide offers a series of charts that offer 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:

- **Shelf-Stable Foods, pp. 4-6:** anything that can be stored at room temperature before opening. This category includes baby foods, condiments, canned goods, and dry goods.
- **Shelf-Stable Beverages, p. 7:** Juices, soda, water, and other drinks designed to be stored at room temperature until opening. Not to be confused with beverages that must be kept refrigerated.
- **Foods Purchased Refrigerated, p. 8:** 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, p. 9:** 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, p. 10:** 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 stored at freezer temperatures. They should be pulled from the freezer only as needed for immediate distribution.
- **Prepared Foods, p. 11:** Prepared dips, side dishes, salads, etc. These items are sometimes available from the Shop-Thru cooler at Greater Pittsburgh Community 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, p. 11:** There are too many factors with fresh produce 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 and Medicines Mean?

The only foods that are required by federal law to have expiration dates are baby food, infant formula, and over-the-counter medications. No medicines should be distributed after the expiration date. 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, and the shelf life of refrigerated and frozen foods can be extended if they are handled properly. Once a perishable item is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires—foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely, though the quality slowly deteriorates over time. Here are some code dates you may see on food packages:

“Expiration Date” (Examples: “Expires 11/15/11” or “Do not use after 11/15/11”)

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

“Pack Date” (Examples: “Packed on 03/01/2012” or “22:5306412” 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 long time past the date.

“Sell By” Date (Example: “Sell by January 1, 2012”. Also called “Pull Date”)

- **Look for it on:** Refrigerated foods such as milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, eggs, lunch meat, packaged salad mixes.
- **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 1/1/12” or “Use Before 1/1/12”)

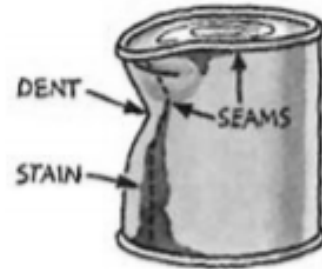
- **Look for it on:** Crackers, cookies, cold cereals, and other dry, shelf stable food.
- **What it means:** This date is the manufacturer's recommendation for how long the food will be at peak quality. After the quality date, the food is still safe to eat but slowly begins to lose nutrients and the 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 too much so that the food is no longer safe to eat.

Do Not Consume Food from Cans or Jars If:

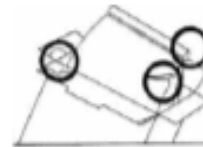
- Leaking or stained
- Swollen can
- Rusty
- Badly dented, crimped or pinched
- Container is cracked
- Foul odor
- Safety seals are broken or missing
- Lids are loose or missing
- Foods exhibit changed color or odor—**never taste suspicious foods!**



Do Not Consume Food from Boxes If:

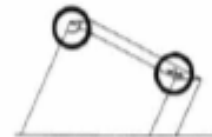
Inside bag:

- Is torn or leaking
- Has moldy or foreign objects inside
- Seals are ripped



Box without an inside bag:

- Is open or torn
- Has live or dead insects, webs, or droppings
- Is stained or wet





| Shelf-Stable Foods | Shelf Life After Code Date |
|--|----------------------------|
| Baby Food | |
| Cereal: dry mixes | Expiration date on package |
| Food in jars, cans | Expiration date on package |
| Formula | Expiration date on package |
| Juice | 1 year |
| Canned Foods | |
| Beans | 3 years |
| Fish: salmon, tuna, sardines, mackerel | 3 years |
| Frosting, canned | 10 months |
| High-acid foods • fruit (including applesauce, juices) • pickles, sauerkraut • baked beans w/ mustard/ vinegar • tomatoes, tomato-based soups & sauces | 1-2 years |
| Low-acid foods • gravy, soups/ broths that aren't tomato-based • pasta, stews, cream sauces • vegetables (not tomatoes) | 2-3 years |
| Meat: beef, chicken, pork, turkey | 2-3 years |
| Pie filling | 3 years |
| Aseptically-packaged Products | |
| UHT Milk | 1 year |
| Broth: beef, chicken, or vegetable | 3 years |
| Soup | 3 years |
| Fruits | 3 years |
| Vegetables | 3 years |
| Condiments, Sauces, Syrups | |
| Barbecue sauce (bottled) | 1 year |
| Frosting, canned | 10 months |
| Gravy (dry mix envelopes) | 2 years |

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 wall so air can circulate.
- ✓ Store canned and boxed goods in a clean, dry, and cool area (below 85°F).
- ✓ Extremely hot (over 100°F) and cold (below 30°F) 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.



| Shelf-Stable Foods (Continued) | Shelf Life After Code Date |
|--|--|
| Condiments, Sauces, Syrups (Continued) | |
| Spaghetti sauce, canned | 18 months |
| Spaghetti sauce, jarred | 18 months |
| Syrup, chocolate | 2 years |
| Syrup, corn | 2 years |
| Syrup, pancake | 2 years |
| Vinegar | 2 years |
| Worcestershire sauce | 2 years |
| Dry Goods | |
| Baking mix, pancake | 9 months |
| Baking mixes (brownie, cake, muffin, etc.) | 12-18 months |
| Baking powder | 18 months |
| Baking soda | indefinite if kept dry |
| Beans, dried | 1 year |
| Bouillon: beef or chicken | 12-24 months |
| Bouillon: vegetable | 12-24 months |
| Bread, commercially prepared (including rolls) | 3-5 days at room temp 3 months stored frozen |
| Cakes, commercially prepared | 2-4 days at room temp several months frozen |
| Candy (all, including chocolate) | 9 months, caramel 18 months, chocolate 36 months, hard candy |
| Casserole Mix | 9-12 months |
| Cereal, cold | 1 year |
| Cereal, hot | 1 year |
| Cookies | 4 months |
| Commeal | 1 year at room temp 2+ years frozen |
| Crackers | 8 months except graham crackers, 2 months |
| Flour, white (all purpose or cake) | 1 year |
| Flour, whole wheat | 6 months keeps longer if refrigerated or frozen |
| Fruit, dried | 6 months |
| Macaroni and Cheese, mix | 9-12 months |
| Nuts, out of shell | 6-12 months, bagged 12-24 months, canned |
| Nuts, in shell | 6-12 months |
| Oatmeal | 12 months |
| Oil, olive, vegetable, salad | 6 months |
| Pasta, dry (egg noodles) | 2-3 years |
| Pasta, dry (no egg) | 2-3 years |



| Shelf-Stable Foods | Shelf Life After Code Date |
|--|---|
| Baby Food | |
| Cereal: dry mixes | Expiration date on package |
| Food in jars, cans | Expiration date on package |
| Formula | Expiration date on package |
| Juice | 1 year |
| Canned Foods | |
| Beans | 3 years |
| Fish: salmon, tuna, sardines, mackerel | 3 years |
| Frosting, canned | 10 months |
| High-acid foods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fruit (including applesauce, juices) • pickles, sauerkraut • baked beans w/ mustard/ vinegar • tomatoes, tomato-based soups & sauces | 1-2 years |
| Low-acid foods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gravy, soups/ broths that aren't tomato-based • pasta, stews, cream sauces • vegetables (not tomatoes) | 2-3 years |
| Meat: beef, chicken, pork, turkey | 2-3 years |
| Pie filling | 3 years |
| Aseptically-packaged Products | |
| UHT Milk | 1 year |
| Broth: beef, chicken, or vegetable | 3 years |
| Soup | 3 years |
| Fruits | 3 years |
| Vegetables | 3 years |
| Condiments, Sauces, Syrups | |
| Barbecue sauce (bottled) | 1 year |
| Frosting, canned | 10 months |
| Gravy (dry mix envelopes) | 2 years |
| Honey | 2 years--remains safe after crystallization. To use, simply immerse closed container in hot (not boiling) water until honey liquefies |
| Jams, jellies, preserves | 18 months |
| Ketchup, cocktail, or chili sauce: jar, bottle, or packet | 18 months |
| Mayonnaise: jar, bottle, or packet | 3-6 months |
| Molasses | 2 years |
| Mustard: jar, bottle, or packet | 2 years |
| Olives | 18-24 months |
| Pickles | 1 year, canned 2 years, jarred--discard if inside of lid is rusty upon opening |
| Salad dressings: bottled | 1 year |
| Salsa: bottled | 12-18 months |



| Shelf-Stable Foods (Continued) | Shelf Life After Code Date |
|---|---|
| Dry Goods (Continued) | |
| Peanut butter | 18 months |
| Popcorn, kernels | 2 years |
| Popcorn, commercially popped and bagged | 2-3 months |
| Popcorn, microwave packets | 1 year |
| Potato chips | 2 months |
| Potatoes, mashed, instant flakes | 1 year |
| Pretzels | 6-8 months |
| Pudding, prepared/ shelf stable | 1 week |
| Rice, brown | 1 year |
| Rice, white | 2 years |
| Rice-based mixes | 6 months |
| Shortening, vegetable | 8-12 months |
| Spices | up to 4 years, whole spices up to 2 years, ground spices Spices lose flavor over time but remain safe to use indefinitely |
| Stuffing mix | 9-12 months |
| Sugar, brown (light or dark) | 18 months |
| Sugar, confectioners | 18 months |
| Sugar, white | 2+ years |
| Sugar substitute | 2 years |
| Toaster pastries | 6 months, fruit 9 months, no fruit |
| Tortillas | 3 months, shelf or refrigerator 6 months, freezer Do not use if they develop mold or harden |



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.

| Shelf-Stable Beverages | Shelf Life After Code Date |
|---|---|
| Cocoa Mixes | 36 months |
| Coffee creamer, liquid shelf stable | 9-12 months |
| Coffee creamer, powdered | 2 years |
| Coffee, ground | 2 years |
| Coffee, instant | 1-2 years |
| Coffee, whole bean | 1 year, vacuum packed |
| Instant breakfast | 6 months |
| Juice, bottle, shelf-stable | 9 months |
| Juice, box | 4-6 months |
| Juice, canned | 18 months |
| Juice concentrate, shelf-stable | |
| Milk, evaporated | 1 year |
| Milk, non-fat dry | 1 year |
| Milk, shelf stable UHT | 6 months |
| Milk, sweetened condensed | 1 year |
| Nutritional aid supplements (Boost, Ensure, etc.) | |
| Rice milk, shelf stable | 6 months |
| Carbonated beverages (soda/ seltzer water) | 3 months, bottles (all) |
| | 3 months, diet (cans) |
| | 9 months, regular soda or seltzer (cans) |
| Soymilk, shelf stable | 6 months |
| Tea, bagged | 18 months |
| Tea, instant | 3 years |
| Tea, loose leaf | 2 years |
| Water | indefinite; store in a cool, dark place away from chemicals |
| Water, flavored | indefinite; store in a cool, dark place away from chemicals |



Tips on Storing Refrigerated Food:

- ✓ Keep all chilled food refrigerated at 40° F 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.



| Dairy and Cooler Items | Refrigerated (40°F or below) | Frozen (0°F or below) |
|---|------------------------------|---|
| Butter | 2-3 months | 1 year |
| Buttermilk | 10-14 days | Freezes poorly |
| Cheese trays | 2 weeks | Do not freeze |
| Cheese, Cottage | 10-15 days | Freezes poorly |
| Cheese, Cream | 2 weeks | Freezes poorly |
| Cheese, hard | 6 months | 6-8 months |
| Cheese, soft | 1-2 weeks | 6 months |
| Cheese, processed | 3-4 weeks | 6 months |
| Coffee creamer, liquid refrigerated | 3 weeks | Follow instructions on package |
| Cream, Half & Half | 3-4 days | 4 months; use for cooking |
| Cream, Heavy | 10 days | 3-4 months; shake upon thawing to loosen; use for cooking |
| Cream, Light | 1 week | 3-4 months; use for cooking |
| Crust, pie or pizza ready to bake | Sell-by date | 2 months |
| Dips, made with sour cream | 2 weeks | Do not freeze |
| Dough, biscuit | Sell-by date | Do not freeze |
| Dough, bread or pizza | Sell-by date | Do not freeze |
| Dough, cookie | Sell-by date | 2-3 months |
| Eggs, in shell | 4-5 weeks | Do not freeze |
| Eggs, pasteurized carton egg substitute, unopened | 10 days | 1 year |
| Eggs, pasteurized carton real eggs, unopened | 10 days | 1 year |
| Juice, purchased refrigerated | 3 weeks | 8-12 months |
| Margarine | 6 months | 12 months |
| Milk (not shelf stable) | 1 week | 1-3 months; use for cooking |
| Pudding, purchased refrigerated | 1-2 days | Do not freeze |
| Salad dressing, refrigerated packets | 3 months | Do not freeze |
| Sour cream | 2-3 weeks | Do not freeze |
| Whipped cream, aerosol | 3-4 weeks | Do not freeze |
| Whipped topping, aerosol | 3 months | Do not freeze |
| Whipped topping, non-dairy tub | 2 weeks | 14 months; do not refreeze once thawed |
| Yogurt | 10-14 days | 1-2 months |



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 0° F or below until distribution.
- ✓ Leave meat, poultry, and seafood in the original packaging when distributing. It is unsafe to open and repack these foods.



| Items Purchased Frozen | Frozen (0°F or below) |
|--|---|
| Bread, Bagels | 3 months |
| Chicken, nuggets/ patties | 2 months |
| Desserts, frozen baked goods | 3-4 months |
| Desserts, frozen cream pies | 1-2 months |
| Desserts, frozen fruit pies | 6-8 months |
| Dinners: pies, casseroles, shrimp, ham, pork, or sausage | 3-4 months |
| Dinners: beef, turkey, chicken, or fish | 6 months |
| Dough, bread | 1 month; longer storage inactivates yeast, weakens gluten |
| Dough, cookie | 3 months |
| Pasteurized eggs in cartons | 1 year, purchased frozen, unopened, never thawed |
| Fish, Breaded | 4-6 months |
| Ice Pops | 6 months |
| Fruit, frozen | 4 months |
| Ice cream | 2-4 months |
| Juice concentrate | 2 years |
| Soy meat substitutes | 12-18 months |
| Vegetables | 8 months |
| Waffles, pancakes | 2 months |
| Whipped topping, non-dairy tub | 6 months |



Prepared Foods:

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



| Prepared Items/ Deli Foods | Refrigerated (41°F or below) | Frozen (0°F or below) |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Chicken, Roasted or Fried | 3-4 days | 4-6 months |
| Fruit, cut | Best By Date | Do Not Freeze |
| Guacamole | 5-7 days | 6 months |
| Hummus, Pasteurized | 3 months | Do Not Freeze |
| Hummus, with Preservatives | 2 months | Do Not Freeze |
| Hummus, traditional (no preservatives, not pasteurized) | 7 days | Do Not Freeze |
| Main dishes, meals | 3-4 days | 2-3 months |
| Meats in gravy or broth (including meat pies) | 1-2 days | 6 months |
| Pasta, fresh | 1 week | 1 month |
| Salads, prepared (macaroni, egg, potato, chicken, tuna, etc.) | 3-5 Days | Do Not Freeze |
| Sauces, Egg-Based (Hollandaise, etc.) | 10 days | Do Not Freeze |
| Side dishes, cooked vegetables | 3-4 days | 1-2 months |
| Side dishes, potato-based (not salad) | 3-4 days | 1-2 months |
| Side dishes, rice | 3-4 days | 1-2 months |
| Soups, Stews | 2-3 days | 4-6 months |
| Spinach, salad greens (bagged) | Date on Bag | Do Not Freeze |

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.
- ✓ If they are very 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.





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Special thanks to: The Greater Pittsburgh Community Foodbank for sharing their best practices with the Community Foodbank of NJ 2020