

A guide to use by and best before dates

Use-by-dates are about safety

A use-by date on food is about safety. This is the most important date to remember. You can eat food until and on the use by date but not after. You will see use-by dates on food that goes off quickly, such as meat products or ready-to-eat salads.

For the use-by date to be a valid guide, you must carefully follow storage instructions. For example, if the instructions on the packaging tell you to refrigerate after opening, you should keep the food in a fridge at 5°C or below. After the use-by date, don't eat, cook or freeze your food. The food could be unsafe to eat or drink, even if it has been stored correctly and looks and smells fine. A lot of foods, including meat and milk, can be frozen before the use-by date though so plan ahead.

Best before dates are about quality

The best before date, sometimes shown as BBE (best before end), is about quality and not safety. The food will be safe to eat after this date but may not be at its best. Its flavour and texture might not be as good. Best before dates appear on a wide range of foods including

- Frozen foods (such as peas, chips and ice cream)
- Dried foods (such as pasta and rice)
- Tinned foods (such as baked beans and canned tomatoes)

The best before date will only be accurate if the food is stored according to the instructions on the packaging.