

How to Interpret “Best By” Dates

Information to accompany Sorting Guidelines

What do different types of date phrases mean?

- **“Best if Used By/Before”** - Indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality.
- **“Sell-By”** - Date tells the store how long to display the product for sale.
- **“Use-By”** - Indicates the last date recommended for the use of produce while at peak quality.
- **“Freeze-By”** - Indicates when a product should be frozen to maintain peak quality.

Note: A series of numbers not in date format indicates the “lot code” of a product, and can usually be deciphered by contacting the manufacturer using information listed on the product.

Do the Sorting Guidelines posters provided by the SLO Food Bank represent time food is safe past the “Best By” date on the product?

NO. We cannot definitively say how long any given product will be safe to consume after the date indicated on the product. Here’s why:

- **VARIABLE DATE INDICATORS** | As referenced above, there are several different types of dates manufacturers use to indicate recommendations for consumption. Given this variable, we cannot provide a specific timeline applicable to each product/category.
- **VARIABLE PRODUCTION METHODS** | Production procedures vary between products within a category. For example, some brands of half and half may be pasteurized at a higher temperature than others, giving them a longer shelf life. For this reason, it’s not possible provide a dependable extended timeline for categories containing products from multiple manufacturers.
- **VARIABLE STORAGE CONDITIONS** | Food goes through multiple stages of transport with varying storage conditions before being donated. The temperature control and handling of products at each of these stages affects shelf life, which fluctuates depending on these variables.

How should I use the info provided on the Sorting Guidelines posters?

The posters provide general guidance on shelf life of food products, and can be referenced in conjunction with a product’s best by date indicated when deciding if a product is safe to consume. Please take caution when inspecting highly perishable foods such as dairy and fresh meat. Remember **your senses are the best detectors of spoiled or unsafe food**. If you are unsure about distributing a product you are permitted to smell/taste, and then discard, one unit of a product for quality assurance.

