



## FOOD LABEL DECODER

# "Best By" does not mean "Bad By."

Hi! I made this guide so families can stop throwing away good food just because of a date on the package.

**DID YOU KNOW: U.S. food date labels are NOT regulated by the federal government.**

**Infant formula is the only exception.**

"Best By" almost always means a quality date set by the company. Most food is still safe to eat past it.

*Source: USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), Food Product Dating, 2024.*

### BEST BY

**About taste. Not safety.**

Most food is still safe to eat for days or weeks after this date. Look. Smell. Use your judgment.

### USE BY

**A guess. Not a law.**

This is when the company thinks the food tastes best. Food is often fine a few days past. Check carefully.

### SELL BY

**For the store. Not you.**

This tells the store when to take it off the shelf. Milk is usually safe 5 to 7 days after this date if kept cold.

## HOW LONG YOU CAN SAFELY EAT THESE FOODS PAST THE DATE

*Based on USDA FoodKeeper guidance and USDA FSIS. Always look and smell before you eat. When unsure, throw it out.*

FOOD	SAFE PAST THE DATE	WARNING SIGN
Eggs (refrigerated)	3 to 5 weeks	Float in water means toss it
Milk (kept cold)	5 to 7 days	Sour smell or chunky texture
Yogurt	1 to 2 weeks	Mold spots or off smell
Hard cheese (cheddar)	3 to 4 weeks	Cut off mold + 1 inch around it
Soft cheese (brie, feta)	1 week ONLY	Any mold means toss the whole thing
Bread (on counter)	5 to 7 days	Mold means toss the whole loaf
Bread (frozen)	3 months	Freezer burn is safe to eat
Canned food (low acid)	2 to 5 years	Bulging or leaking means DANGER
Dry pasta or rice	1 to 2 years	Bugs or musty smell means no
Cooked rice (in fridge)	3 to 4 days	Spoils fast at room temp
Strawberries (vinegar wash)	7 to 10 days	Remove moldy + touching ones
Deli meat (opened)	3 to 5 days only	Slimy means throw out
Raw chicken or poultry	Cook within 1 to 2 days	STRICT. When in doubt toss.
Infant formula	NEVER past expiration	The ONLY label that is regulated

## A NOTE FROM ME

**We use this guide in our house every single week.**

Before I built EcoServe my mom would toss yogurt the day after the Best By date. I thought that was normal. Then I learned yogurt is usually fine for 1 to 2 MORE weeks if it smells okay. I was so surprised. We also started freezing bread because freezer bread stays good for 3 months. Now we do a vinegar wash on strawberries which makes them last 7 to 10 days. Last month my family saved about \$40 from food we used to toss.

## WHY THIS GUIDE MATTERS

**\$1,300**

the average U.S. household spends on food it throws away every year

**20%**

of all household food waste is caused by people misreading date labels

**3B lbs**

of food is thrown out yearly in the U.S. because of label confusion

**88%**

of people throw food out by the label date at least sometimes

## WHERE THESE NUMBERS COME FROM

1. USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). Food Product Dating. [fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/food-product-dating](https://fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/food-product-dating)
2. USDA FoodKeeper App. [foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/foodkeeper-app](https://foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/foodkeeper-app)
3. USDA and FDA Joint Request for Information on Food Date Labeling. December 2024. [usda.gov/article/usda-fda-seek-information-about-food-date-labeling](https://usda.gov/article/usda-fda-seek-information-about-food-date-labeling)
4. ReFED + Harvard Law School + Johns Hopkins. Consumer Perceptions of Food Date Labels: 2025 National Survey. [refed.org](https://refed.org)
5. International Food Information Council (IFIC). 2025 Spotlight Survey on Food Date Labels. [ific.org](https://ific.org)

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