



## "Use by"/ "Sell by" Date

Product dating of meat and poultry is not required by Federal regulations. However, if a calendar date is used, it must express both the month and day of the month (and the year, in the case of shelf-stable and frozen products). If a calendar date is shown, immediately adjacent to the date *must be* a phrase explaining the meaning of that date such as "sell by" or "use before." These dates cannot be modified if packaged under federal inspection. On the other hand, if a retailer puts the labels on products, they may be changed if the product remains wholesome.

There is no uniform or universally accepted system used for food dating in the United States. Although dating of some foods is required by more than 20 states, there are areas of the country where much of the food supply has some type of open date and other areas where almost no food is dated.

"Open Dating" (use of a calendar date as opposed to a code) on a food product is a date stamped on a product's package to help the store determine how long to display the product for sale. Open dating is found primarily on perishable foods such as meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products. "Closed" or "coded" dating might appear on shelf-stable products such as cans and boxes of food.

The following are labeling guidelines to which consumers should adhere. These guidelines ensure product safety provided [safe handling](#) procedures are performed after purchase and in home.

- "*Sell By*" date - tells the retailer how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires. This date most often appears on processed products that are sealed in a plant, like hotdogs or sausages.
- "*Best if Used By*" date - Date by which product should be used for best flavor and quality. It is not a purchase or safety date. After this date, the product could develop an off odor, flavor or appearance due to spoilage bacteria.
- "*Use-By*" date - the last date recommended for use of the product while at peak quality. The manufacturer determines this date. After this date, consumers should not use and/or purchase the product.

**Tip:** Always follow manufacturers' handling and preparation instructions or the [safe handling label](#) that is on every package of fresh meat and poultry.

For more information, visit [www.FSIS.USDA.gov/OA/pubs/dating.htm](http://www.FSIS.USDA.gov/OA/pubs/dating.htm) or contact the Meat and Poultry hotline at 1-800-535-4555.