

Food safety BYTES

Number: 9

Food date labelling

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Food date labelling

It is really important to know the difference between best before and use-by dates because some foods will deteriorate over time in a way that may present a food safety risk. On most packaged food you will see either a use-by date or a best before date.

Best before dates

These are also sometimes known as best before end or BBE.

Best before dates are about quality and not safety. Food will still be safe to eat after the best before date listed on a product, but may not be at its best. This could mean that the flavour or texture may not be as it was when the food was first manufactured.

The best before date will only be accurate if the food is stored according to instructions specified on the packaging. These instructions are to retain the quality of the product.

Best before dates will appear on a wide range of foods including frozen foods, dried foods, tinned foods and cheese.

The sniff test

With foods that have a best before date, people can choose to use sensory cues to find out if the food is okay to eat. For example, with dairy products such as milk, the 'sniff test' can be used to see if it has soured, or with bread mould may be visible, or for foods such as biscuits or crisps you can taste to see if they are stale.

Use-by dates

A use-by date on food is about safety. Foods that display use-by dates are highly perishable and quickly become unsafe to eat. These include foods such as fresh meat or ready-to-eat salads. If consumed after the use-by date, there is a risk that the food could cause illness. Foods can be eaten until the use by date but not afterwards.

Storage instructions specified on the packaging must be carefully followed. It is a legal requirement that where a use-by date is displayed, there must also be details of storage conditions that must be followed in order to keep the food safe for the specified amount of time.

Manufacturers are responsible for deciding whether to apply a use-by date or a best before date on their products. This will depend on factors such as how the food is made and food safety risks.