

Product dates help ensure that meat products will be wholesome and delicious when prepared.

*Check your dates.*



# MEAT MATTERS

## UNDERSTANDING PRODUCT DATING



For more information, please visit [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov) or call USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline 888.674.6854

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# UNDERSTANDING PRODUCT DATING

Buying and preparing fresh, wholesome meat is important to consumers. Traditionally, consumers have used their eyes, nose and touch to evaluate the appearance of fresh meat and to check for signs of spoilage.

Today, the practice of dating meat products is more common than ever, but the different types of dates can be confusing. Some say “use by,” some say “sell by” and some indicate the date products were made or when they will be “best.” This brochure is designed to help consumers interpret this information and take actions to ensure safety.

Some of the most common dates found on meat and poultry products include:

✓ **“Open Date” or Simple Calendar Date**

Simple calendar dates are sometimes stamped on products to help stores rotate and display products properly. Sometimes dates say “Best if used by (or before).” This dating is simply recommending when to eat a product for best quality

✓ **“Sell-By Date”**

This date tells the store how long to display the product for sale. Consumers should buy the product before the date expires and then use or freeze according to the charts in this brochure.

✓ **“Use-By”**

This date is the last date recommended for the use or freezing of the product while at peak quality. The date has been determined by the manufacturer of the product. After this date, consumers should not use and/or purchase the product. This type of date is most often found on meat products and offers the most helpful information.

## Is my meat safe after the date expires?

Meat does not become “unsafe” at a single point in time. However, it is best to pay careful attention to products displaying dates.

- ✓ If product has a “use-by” date, follow that date.
- ✓ If product has a “sell-by” date or no date, cook or freeze the product according to the guidelines in the charts in this brochure.

## What about color, smell and texture? And what if a package is bulging?

As they say, “When in doubt, throw it out.” If a product has an off odor—even if it hasn’t reached its use-by date—consumers should toss it. Strong odors are good indicators of spoilage. A slimy or slippery texture sometimes, but not always, appears on fresh meat that has spoiled. While spoilage does not mean the product is unsafe, it does mean that it may not taste good or be of high quality.

When meat products are packaged in sealed, airtight packages, excessive bulging can also be a signal of spoilage. When foods spoil, they produce gases. When packages are tightly sealed, like those at a plant, these spoilage gases will make packages bulge.

Consumers should not rely on color as an indicator of meat freshness. Packaging systems, added marinades and other ingredients can impact color. Use-by dates are the best indicator of freshness and smell is the surest sign of spoilage.

## What if I freeze the product?

If meat products have been frozen and defrosted, dates on packages no longer apply. Consumers should mark product packages with the date the meat is defrosted. This date helps consumers monitor the refrigerator shelf life of a product after defrosting. Follow the time frames in figures 1 and 2.

**Figure 1**  
**Refrigerator Storage of**  
**Fresh or Uncooked Products**

Product	Storage Times After Purchase
Poultry	1-2 days
Beef, Veal, Pork and Lamb	3-5 days
Ground Meat and Ground Poultry	1-2 days
Fresh Variety Meats (Liver, Tongue, Brain, Kidneys, Heart, Chitterlings)	1-2 days
Cured Ham, Cook-Before-Eating	5-7 days
Sausage from: Pork, Beef or Turkey, Uncooked	1-2 days

**Figure 2**  
**Refrigerator Storage of**  
**Processed Products Sealed at Plant**

Processed Product	Unopened	Opened
Cooked Poultry	3-4 days	3-4 days
Cooked Sausage	3-4 days	3-4 days
Sausage shelf-stable Hard/Dry	6 weeks	3 weeks
Corned Beef uncooked, in pouch with pickling juices	5-7 days	3-4 days
Bacon	2 weeks	7 days
Hot dogs	2 weeks	7 days
Luncheon meat	2 weeks	3-5 days
Ham, fully cooked	7 days	slices, 3 days whole, 7 days
Ham, canned, labeled “keep refrigerated”	9 months	3-4 days
Ham, canned, shelf stable	2 years pantry	3-5 days
Canned Meat and Poultry shelf stable	2-5 years pantry	3-4 days