Taste It or Toss It - Is It Too Old to Eat?

To taste or to toss? THAT is the question! Nine out of ten Americans needlessly throw away food because they are confused about the “sell by”, “use by”, and “best if used by” dates. This is perfectly good food – that could safely be eaten by those who purchased it or used to feed the almost 1 in 6 people in our country that face hunger. But why the confusion? And how can we decrease the food waste?

To start, the food expiration date labeling system is not standardized nationally – rules can vary from state to state. And the language certainly isn’t clear. Originally, the food expiration date labels were designed to be indicators of freshness; but with variability of labeling practices (from state to state and manufacturer to manufacturer), many Americans have been led to believe, mistakenly, that these labels are indicators of how safe the food is, spoilage-wise.

It’s important to understand: the dates on the labels of your foods don’t tell you whether or not your food is safe to eat. For example: you buy a gallon of milk at the store with a “sell by” date on it, which actually doesn’t mean much to you, as a consumer. The “sell by” date is designed to help the store with stock rotation, suggesting that the milk still has shelf life left. Once you get that milk home, the date doesn’t certify that the milk is “good”, nor does it prove that it’s “bad”. It might be good for another week; it could have spoiled yesterday, if someone left it on the counter too long. Or if hotdogs were left out at a picnic in warm temperatures for several hours, they may not be safe, even if date on the package hasn’t passed. The date on the label simply can’t you if the product is safe to eat!

Here is an explanation of some common labeling terms:
“Best if Used By”, “Best By”, “Best Before”: These terms are voluntarily placed on products by the manufacturer. Generally, these terms have little to do with food safety, but rather peak quality and freshness. They are not “purchase” dates for “food safety dates.” You may notice slight changes in color, flavor, or texture of these foods if you eat them after the date listed on the label, but assuming you are storing the unopened package according to manufacturer directions, they should remain safe after the date on the package. It would be appropriate to open a product after the date on the package to examine it and smell it; always toss foods that have developed an off flavor, odor, or appearance. But if you’re opening the product after the “Best if Used By”, “Best By”, “Best Before” date and it seems fine, go ahead and enjoy it!

If a product has a “use by” date on it, it’s probably best to consume or freeze that product by that date, but it’s not guaranteed to be “good” or “bad” after that date passes. The date is the last date that the manufacturer believes you can enjoy the product at peak quality.

The “Sell By” date is more for the retailer than the consumer. It is a stocking tool used by the store to tell show how long they can display the item on the shelf. You’ll typically find “Sell By” dates on perishables like meat, seafood, poultry and milk. You should
definitely purchase your item before or on the “Sell By” date on the label, but you can feel comfortable knowing that you can store/use the product at home for some time after the date expires, assuming you are following safe storage procedures. Many Americans are throwing away food after the “sell by” date, mistakenly believing that the food somehow dangerous, bad, or spoiled after the “sell by” date.

But what exactly are “safe storage procedures”? And assuming you follow them, how long can you expect certain products to last? Fresh poultry, ground beef/chicken, uncooked sausage need to be stored in the fridge, at 40 degrees or cooler, and cooked or frozen within 1-2 days. For fresh beef, veal, pork, and lamb, store these in the fridge at 40 degrees or cooler as well, and cook or freeze them within 3-5 days. Eggs will remain “good” (i.e. safe, spoilage-wise) in the 40-degree fridge for 3-5 weeks! The “sell by” or “exp” date on the eggs will likely pass during that time period, but the eggs will still be perfectly safe to eat, provided they are kept in your cold refrigerator. Pre-cooked luncheon meat will be safe in your 40-degree refrigerator for 2 weeks after the “sell by” date in an unopened package, but once the package is opened, plan to eat the product within 3-5 days. And remember that if you freeze a perishable product (like meat), the dates on the package no longer matter, because foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely.

And so, what are some ideas for using your foods that may not be at their “freshest” and/or peak quality, but are still safe to eat? Try dicing up left over French fries and adding them to an omelet. Mix stale cereal into muffin batter or crisp it up in the oven for a bit and then use it in a trail mix. You can use wilted spinach and/or kale to make a pesto sauce – just add it to a blender or food processor with a little olive oil, pine nuts, basil, and garlic. Fruits that are getting soft can easily be blended into smoothies or cut/mashed up to make great baked fruit crisps too, with oatmeal topping.

The bottom line? Don’t needlessly contribute to the food waste problem in the US, where an estimated 40% of our food never gets eaten! You mostly likely do not need to throw your food way simply because the date on the label has passed; remember – most of these dates are related to peak freshness and quality and don’t tell you if the product is safe to eat. If you have more questions about food safety or want to discuss other nutrition-related concerns, feel free to schedule a free 1-hour nutrition assessment with Campus Recreation’s registered dietitian. Sign up here: https://campusrec.utsa.edu/nutritionregistration

http://www.nrdc.org/food/expiration-dates.asp
https://www.dosomething.org/facts/11-facts-about-hunger-us
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