

Use it or lose it

Did you know the use-by date on food isn't valid once you've opened the packet? **Belinda Allan** takes a look at the food dating game and offers advice on how to keep your family safe from food-borne illness.

According to a survey funded by the New Zealand Food Safety Authority (NZFSA), people are more worried about food poisoning than any other food related issue, and not without reason. Every year, there are an estimated 119,000 cases of food-borne illness. Up to 40 percent of those are believed to be caused by unsafe food handling practices in the home.

Taking notice of 'use-by' and 'best-before' dates is one way you can reduce your risk. Most packaged foods with a shelf life of less than two years must have one of these labels. There are some exceptions. Bread, for example, can have a 'baked on' date.

The 'use-by' date is about food safety. It is determined by the time required for pathogens in food to grow to levels above which illness might occur. Providing the food is stored correctly and isn't opened, it should be safe to eat until its use-by date. After the use-by date, a food can't legally be sold and shouldn't be eaten. Use-by dates usually appear on perishable food like meat, poultry and deli products.



'Best-before' dates are about food quality. Foods can be sold after their best-before dates provided they are fit for consumption. However, they may have lost quality and some nutritional value. You'll find best-before dates on less perishable foods, such as cereals, flour and canned goods.

It sounds simple but the reality can be confusing. Once you've opened the packaging, the shelf life is the same as if the product was unpackaged. For example, a packet of vacuum-packed smoked salmon may have a use-by date that is one month away, but once you've opened it, you should keep the salmon in the fridge and eat it within two days.

Food manufacturers have to provide directions for use and storage on the packaging to ensure the food will keep until the date shown. This should include information about how quickly the food should be eaten after it is opened. We checked out the deli section of the supermarket and found that most manufacturers complied. But some provided no instructions on what to do once you've opened the pack.

Our Advice

- Choose products with informative labels that list storage instructions. Look for products with the longest use-by dates.
- Never taste food that looks or smells strange. If in doubt, throw it out.
- Buy food in quantities appropriate to your household usage. If you live alone, buy small packages to avoid lengthy storage or divide perishable food into small portions and freeze for later use.
- If you get sick take to your bed and drink plenty of fluids. Water is fine, but rehydrating fluids like sports drinks may be better: you're trying to make up for the fluids lost in the diarrhoea. See your doctor if the symptoms are severe or persist beyond a couple of

days. Babies and small children with severe diarrhoea should always be taken to a doctor. If you think you know which food made you sick inform your local public health service.

How long should you keep it for?

According to Dr Greg Simmons, from the Foodsafe Partnership, how long it is safe to keep a particular food depends on many factors: its water and protein content, its freshness pathogens likely to grow on the food, and your immune status.



Also, use-by dates should be treated with caution if you are pregnant or have lowered immunity due to illness or medical treatment.

Always take note of the use-by date and storage instructions if there are any. As a general guide, here's how long you can keep food in your fridge once the packaging is opened.

Butter	2 months	Cheddar	2 months
Margarine	2 months	Cottage cheese	5 days
Smoked salmon	2 days	Cream cheese	2 weeks
Smoked chicken	3 days	Sour cream	1 week
Cooked chicken	2 days	Frankfurters	5 days
Pate	3 days	Soy milk	5 days
Bacon	7 days	Tomato sauce	8 weeks
Salami	7 days	Sliced ham	5 days
Luncheon	3 days	Canned fish	2 days
Pasta sauce	2 days	Mayonnaise	6 months
Long-life milk	3-10 days	Pickles and chutney	8 weeks
Cream	5 days	Baked beans	3 days
Camembert or brie	1 week	Canned tomatoes	3 days

For safe food chill out!

- Keep your fridge between 0 and 4 degrees Celsius. Older fridges frequently run at higher temperatures. You can check the temperature with a fridge thermometer, available from hardware stores.
- Replace poor door seals – they stop a fridge from maintaining its temperature.
- Don't jam in the food. Air should be able to circulate, to maintain an even temperature.
- Keep raw meat in the chiller or on the bottom shelf, separate from other raw and ready-to-eat foods.
- Defrost food in the fridge, not on the bench. Avoid thaw drips getting onto other foods.
- Keep foods in the fridge covered with cling film or in containers with watertight lids.
- Throw out refrigerated leftovers after two days unless they've been frozen. Once thawed, frozen leftovers should also be thrown out after two days.
- Keep your fridge clean.