Understanding Food Dates

What Center of Hope Volunteers Need to Know

A package's printed date can raise an understandable question: "Should we still be giving this to our guests?"

According to Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan, many canned and boxed foods remain safe beyond the date on the package when properly stored and handled. Understanding what those dates mean helps us protect our guests and avoid throwing away usable food.

The date is one part of the decision. The type of food, storage history, and package condition also matter.

What do the different dates mean?

"Best By" or "Best if Used By" generally describes quality. It indicates when the manufacturer expects the product to have its best flavor or texture. Passing that date does not automatically make a shelf-stable product unsafe.

"Sell By" helps stores manage inventory. Some properly handled refrigerated foods remain usable afterward. Volunteers should follow the Center's approved guidelines for each product.

"Pack Date" identifies when a product was packaged. It may appear as a date or a manufacturer's code.

Infant formula and baby food require special attention. Gleaners instructs agencies not to distribute these products after their expiration dates.

Follow the Center's food-handling guidelines

Do not use a blanket rule such as "Everything is good for a year past its date." Different products require different decisions.

Follow Center of Hope's current storage, sorting, and distribution instructions. If you are unsure about an item, set it aside for review by the designated staff member before placing it on the shelf.

Check for damaged packaging, broken seals, leaks, bulging cans, mold, or other signs of spoilage. Bring questionable items to staff. An acceptable date does not make damaged or improperly stored food safe.

Understand the role of freezing

Proper freezing can extend storage life. Gleaners explains that food kept continuously frozen can remain safe even as its quality declines over time.

That applies to food that was safe when frozen and remained properly frozen. Freezing does not make spoiled or mishandled food safe. Follow the Center's instructions for receiving, storing, and distributing frozen products.

Answer guests' questions respectfully

A guest who questions a date is expressing a reasonable concern. Listen without dismissing the question or pressuring them to accept the item.

You can say:

> "That is a best-by date, which generally refers to quality. Let me check our guidelines or ask a staff member about this particular item."

Avoid guaranteeing that something is safe when you do not know its storage history or the applicable guideline. Give guests room to decline an item.

When you are unsure, ask

Our goal is to provide food that is safe, usable, and offered with dignity. Understanding date labels helps us make thoughtful decisions, but volunteers should not have to guess.

Check the label. Check the condition. Follow the Center's guidelines. Ask staff when something is uncertain.

Source: Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan, "Food Safety: What Is an Expiration Date?" This older educational brochure explains date labels; current Gleaners partner requirements and Center of Hope procedures should guide distribution decisions.