



Food labelling – what to look out for

Have you ever bought something from the supermarket only to get home and realise it's past its expiry date? Is it still ok to eat? And can a shop sell items that are out of date? We take a look at what the date labels mean on the food we buy.

What should I look out for?

You should always look for the date mark on food before you buy it. The date mark lets you know the end of a food's shelf life. This is the amount of time the food can be kept under proper storage conditions before it becomes unsafe or starts to lose quality.

What's the difference between 'Use By' and 'Best Before' dates?

Date marks come under different headings and there is a difference between a 'Use By' date and a 'Best Before' date.

A 'Use By' date shows how long your food should keep for safely if the storage instructions are followed. You shouldn't buy or eat food if the 'Use By' date has passed. It's illegal to sell food with an expired 'Use By' date and if a shop is found to be selling unfit food, they can be fined.

A 'Best Before' date is different in that it refers to the quality of the food. This date gives you an idea of when the food should be eaten if you want to eat it at its best quality. After the 'Best Before' date it is likely that the quality of the product may begin to change. It isn't a safety issue and food can still be sold by shops beyond its 'Best Before' date as long as it's still fit to eat.

Often, shops may have goods where the 'Best Before' date has expired and sell them for a reduced price.

Keep in mind that it's not legally required to date label all food. For example, unpackaged foods such as loose fruit, or food with a shelf life of longer than two years are not required to have a date label.

Can a shop sell food that is rotten and looks unsafe to eat?

No. The Food Act says that food that is unfit for human consumption must not be sold. If shops are selling rotten food or food past its 'Use By' date you should contact the New Zealand Food Safety Authority by phoning on 0800 693 721.

Other examples of things you should report to the New Zealand Food Safety Authority include finding foreign objects in food, and misrepresentation or mislabelling of food.

Can I get a refund if I've unknowingly bought food past its expiry date?

You have rights under the Consumer Guarantees Act, which says that any goods sold must be of acceptable quality. If they are not you may be entitled to a full refund from the shop. Check the food package as the producer may have a money back guarantee - if you send in the remainder of the food with a receipt they will refund you.

What about storage instructions?

Bugs like salmonella and listeria can grow to illness-causing levels if your food isn't stored properly. That's why it's important to follow any storage instructions on the packet, for example, 'Refrigerate after opening'.

These storage instructions are a good guide to handling your food so that its safety or quality isn't affected before the date mark expires.

Does the label have to say the country of origin?

Country of origin labelling is voluntary in New Zealand and suppliers (usually manufacturers, transporters or sellers) may choose not to display these details. But they must have contact details for distributors or manufacturers in New Zealand, so you can ask about the food.

What about items labelled 'Not for Individual Resale'?

Items that are labelled 'Not for Individual Resale' shouldn't be sold separately. These items would have been part of a multi-pack and the packaging has been designed for that purpose. If the items have been broken up and sold individually, important information like the 'Use By' date may be missing as this information may have only been printed on the main packaging.

Further information

For more information on food safety and labelling, [links] [visit the New Zealand Food Safety website](#) [external website] or call 0800 693 721. [Information on the Consumer Guarantees Act](#) is available from your local [Citizens Advice Bureau](#) [external website].