



Is your canned and frozen food safe to eat? Here's how to tell



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How can we tell if canned/frozen/packaged food is still good to eat? What do the package dates tell us? Joanne F., Arroyo Grande, CA

Almost everyone can relate to these timely questions. At the earliest mention of “shelter at home,” I inventoried our food reserves, and purchased items needed to feed my household until malcy returned. Who would think social distancing might stretch out longer?

Did you over buy food when the “shelter at home” requirement was made? If yes, it may be time to consider inventorying what’s in your pantry and freezer.

The safety and quality of commercially canned food relies mostly storage conditions you control. Here are some things to consider:

- Store canned food in a cool, clean, dark, dry place where temperatures are below 85°F (between 50-70°F is best) but not freezing.
- Rotate foods so oldest is used first.
- If the can is in good shape (no rust, deep dents, swelling), the contents should be safe to eat, although the taste, texture and nutritional value of the food can diminish over time.

- Home canned foods should be used within 1 year of preparation.

NEVER TASTE OR USE food from containers that show signs of contamination: leaking, bulging, or badly dented cans; cracked jars or jars with loose or bulging lids; canned food with a foul odor; milky liquids surrounding vegetables that should be clear; or any container that spurts liquid when you open it.

According to the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, ***infant formula is the only product required by Federal regulations to have a "use by" date.*** Manufacturer's will use dates and labeling to let retailers know when to pull items from grocery shelves and for consumers to know when the quality or freshness of a product will lessen. These dates DO NOT indicate food safety.

- **"Best if Used By/Before"** date indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality.
- **"Sell-By"** date tells the store how long to display the product for inventory management.
- **"Use-By"** date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date ***except for when used on infant formula.***
- **"Freeze-By"** date indicates when a product should be frozen to maintain peak quality.

Find a comprehensive food storage guide here:

https://nchfp.uga.edu/how/store/UGA_foodstorage_2011.pdf or use the USDA FoodKeeper App.

It's free to download or access the information from your computer at

<https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/foodkeeper-app>

For more information contact the UCCE Master Food Preserver helpline at 805-781-1429 or email slomfp@ucanr.edu.

Authors: Michael, C., Ravalin, D., Soule, K.E. (April 2020)

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