

Is Food Still Good After the Sell-By Date?

Think of all the times you threw food and drink out because it had passed the “sell-by” date.

The “sell-by” date seems like a good way to know when to throw food out, but in most cases, the “sell-by” or “best used by” date doesn’t necessarily mean the food is spoiled.

“What most people think is that the food is bad after that date and that it could be hazardous,” Dr. Michael Hansen, a senior staff scientist at Consumers Union, a consumer trade group, told ABC News.

But Hansen said the dates listed on food actually don’t give much indication if a product has spoiled or not.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture says the “sell-by” date actually tells stores how long to display the product for sale. So the date doesn’t mean the product has gone bad once the date on the package has passed.

In reality, the date is recommended for flavor and quality standards. For example, it may be safe to eat a can of soup long after the “best if used by” date passes, although the flavor may not be as good.

In terms of actual expiration dates, the federal government only requires manufacturers of infant formula to use them.

So the “best used by” date is actually the last date of the product’s peak quality.

In the United States, about 30-40 percent of all food is wasted, or the equivalent of \$160 billion worth, according to the Department of Agriculture.

It's unclear how much of this food was tossed out because it had passed its "sell-by" date, but a survey of 1,000 grocery shoppers by the Food Marketing Institute found nearly half of consumers said they threw food out either "fairly often" or "every time" after the "sell-by" or "best-by date."

"My observation is that even people who ignore the dates think they're breaking a rule," Dana Gunders, a Natural Resources Defense Council scientist told the *Wall Street Journal*. "The manufacturer is not trying to tell you to throw a product out at that date."

The USDA maintains guidelines on how long to keep perishable items in the refrigerator here. Food with a "use-by" date shouldn't be eaten after that date passes.