



Food Bank Products Shelf Life Guide



Source: Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank Shelf-life of food bank products 2018, FoodKeeper 2019

Introduction

Second Harvest often distributes food items after the date on the package. This food is still safe to eat. Food manufacturers use different date codes to ensure that consumers receive their product at peak quality. Once a product is past code date, many manufacturers donate it to food banks. Food Bank staff monitors this food to ensure that the quality remains good. This guide provides a reference for the “shelf life” of this product, or how long these foods are good past code date. Products should be distributed prior to exceeding shelf life, so the consumer has time to receive, store, and/or prepare foods. Produce should be checked for quality and assessed for best distribution. This guide offers a thorough list of foods that may be distributed by the Food Bank. However, some items that you receive may not be covered by the guidance.

How to use this guide:

The first section of the guide provides a brief introduction on how manufacturers use dates to code their food for purchase. Then, the guide offers a series of charts that provide guidance on how long different foods can be safely consumed past the date stamped on the packaging.

The foods listed in this guide are organized according to the following categories:

- Explanation of Package Code Dates: Few products have a set expiration date. Find out what the dates on your packages really mean.
- Examining Cans and Boxes for Safety: When is a package too damaged to be safe?
- Shelf-Stable Foods: Anything that can be stored at room temperature before opening. This category includes baby foods, condiments, canned goods, and dry goods.
- Shelf-Stable Beverages: Juices, soda, water, and other drinks designed to be stored at room temperature until opening. Not to be confused with beverages that must be kept refrigerated.
- Foods Purchased Refrigerated: This category includes beverages that must be kept cold. Many of these items can be frozen after purchase to increase their storage time. This guide indicates how long an item can be expected to keep in the refrigerator or freezer.
- Foods Purchased Frozen: Foods that would be found in the freezer section of a grocery store. These foods should be stored frozen until they are to be used and should be pulled only as needed for immediate distribution.
- Fresh Meats: This includes meats distributed frozen through the food bank. These meats were frozen on or before the sell-by date marked on each package. Meats will keep indefinitely when stored at freezer temperatures. They should be pulled from the freezer only as needed for immediate distribution.
- Prepared Foods: Prepared dips, side dishes, salads, etc. These items are sometimes available from curbside pick up at the Food Bank or may be available through other donation streams. These items are generally perishable, and you should pay close attention to how long the best by date can be extended safely.
- Fresh Produce: Fresh produce timelines are subject to quality inspections; we have provided some tips for how to store certain items for the longest life and best flavor.

What do the dates on food packages mean?

The only foods that are required by federal law to have expiration dates are baby food and infant formula. The Food Bank does not distribute most baby food past its expiration date. However, some products designed for babies such as juice and cookies or biscuits can be distributed past their date and are safe to eat.

Many canned and boxed products are safe to eat long after the date on the container and the shelf life of refrigerated and frozen foods can be extended if they are handled properly. Once a perishable item is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires — foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely, though the quality slowly deteriorates over time. Here are some code dates you may see on food packages:

Expiration Date (Examples: Expires 11/15/11 or Do not use after 11/15/11)

- **Look for it on:** Baby food and formula, medicines, vitamins, yeast, baking powder.
- **What it means:** Do not distribute infant formula, baby food, vitamins, or medicines after the expiration date. Yeast and baking powder work less well after expiration but are safe to eat.

Pack Date (Examples: Packed on 03/01/2012 or 22:5306412 or KL064)

- **Look for it on:** Canned food, crackers, cookies, spices.
- **What it means:** This is the date the food was packaged. A code is often used that cannot be understood by the general public, often numbering days sequentially such that January 1 is day 001 and December 31 is day 365 (366 in leap years). Usually this food is of good quality and safe to eat for a long time past the date.

Sell-By Date (Example: Sell by January 1, 2012. Also called **Pull Date**)

- **Look for it on:** Refrigerated foods such as milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, eggs, lunch meat, packaged salad mixes.
- **What it means:** The store must sell these foods before the code date listed and often donates these foods when they are close to date. If the food has been handled properly, it is still safe to eat and the quality is good. Food Bank staff monitors this food to ensure that the quality remains good.

Use-By or Quality Date (Examples: Best if used by 1/1/12 or Use Before 1/1/12)

- **Look for it on:** Crackers, cookies, cold cereals, and other dry, shelf-stable food.
- **What it means:** This date is the manufacturer's recommendation for how long the food will be at peak quality. After the quality date, the food is still safe to eat but slowly begins to lose nutrients and the quality begins to lessen.

Shelf-stable product

Most shelf-stable or dry foods (cans, boxes, bags) remain edible for several days, months or even years past their code date. Always examine the packaging to make sure it has not been damaged too much so that the food is no longer safe to eat. **Do not consume food from cans or jars if:**

- Leaking or stained
- Swollen can
- Rusty
- Badly dented, crimped, or pinched
- Container is cracked
- Foul odor
- Safety seals are broken or missing
- Lids are loose or missing
- Foods exhibit changed color or odor — never taste suspicious foods.

Do not consume food from boxes if:

Inside bag:

- Is torn or leaking
- Has moldy or foreign objects inside
- Seals are ripped

Box without an inside bag:

- Is open or torn

- Has live or dead insects, webs, or droppings
- Is stained or wet

Tips on storing canned and boxed food:

- Store cans and boxes off the floor, either on a pallet or shelf and 18 inches away from the wall so air can circulate.
- Store canned and boxed goods in a clean, dry, and cool area (below 85°F).
- Extremely hot (over 100°F) and cold (below 30°F) temperatures can damage goods and shorten shelf life.
- Always rotate your stock – first in – first out. Distribute or use older products before newer ones.

Shelf-Stable Foods	Shelf Life After Code Date
Baby Food	
Cereal, dry mixes	Expiration date on package
Food in jars, cans	Expiration date on package
Formula	Expiration date on package
Juice	1 year
Canned Foods	
Beans	3 years
Fish: salmon, tuna, sardines, mackerel	3 years
Frosting, canned	10 months
High-acid foods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fruit (including applesauce, juices) • pickles, sauerkraut • baked beans w/mustard/vinegar • tomatoes, tomato-based soups & sauces 	1-2 years
Low-acid foods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gravy, soups, broths that aren't tomato based • pasta, stews, cream sauces • vegetables (not tomatoes) 	2-3 years
Meat: beef, chicken, pork, turkey	2-3 years
Pie filling	3 years
Aseptically packaged Products	
UHT (Ultra High Temperature) Milk	1 year
Broth: beef, chicken, or vegetable	3 years
Soup	3 years
Fruits	3 years

Vegetables	3 years
Condiments, Sauces and Syrups	
Barbecue sauce, bottled	1 year
Frosting, canned	10 months
Gravy, dry mix envelopes	2 years
Honey	2 years
Jams, jellies, preserves	18 months
Ketchup, cocktail, or chili sauce: jar, bottle, or packet	18 months
Mayonnaise: jar, bottle, or packet	3-6 months
Molasses	2 years
Mustard: jar, bottle, or packet	2 years
Olives	18-24 months
Pickles	1 year, canned 2 years, jarred
Salad dressings, bottled	1 year
Salsa, bottled	12-18 months
Spaghetti sauce, canned or jarred	18 months
Syrups, chocolate, maple, corn	2 years
Vinegar	2 years
Worcestershire sauce	2 years
Dry Goods	
Baking mix, pancake	9 months
Baking mixes: brownie, cake, muffin, etc.	12-18 months
Baking powder	18 months
Baking soda	Indefinite if kept dry
Beans, dried	1 year
Bouillon, beef, vegetable, or chicken	12-24 months
Baking mixes: brownie, cake, muffin, etc.	12-18 months

Baking powder	18 months
Baking soda	Indefinite if kept dry
Beans, dried	1 year
Bouillon, beef, vegetable, or chicken	12-24 months
Bread, commercially prepared (including rolls)	3-5 days at room temp 3 months stored frozen
Cakes, commercially prepared	2-4 days at room temp Several months frozen
Candy (all, including chocolate)	9 months, caramel 18 months, chocolate 36 months, hard candy
Casserole Mix	9-12 months
Cereal, cold or hot	1 year
Cookies	4 months
Cornmeal	1 year at room temp 2+ years frozen
Crackers	8 months Except graham crackers, 2 months
Flour, white (all purpose or cake)	1 year
Flour, whole wheat	6 months Keeps longer if refrigerated or frozen
Fruit, dried	6 months
Macaroni and Cheese, mix	9-12 months
Nuts, out of shell and in shell	6-12 months, bagged 12-24 months, canned
Oatmeal	12 months
Oil: olive, vegetable, salad	6 months
Pasta, dry	2-3 years
Peanut butter	18 months
Popcorn, kernels	2 years
Popcorn, commercially popped and bagged	2-3 months
Popcorn, microwave packets	1 year

Potato chips	2 months
Potatoes, mashed, instant flakes	1 year
Pretzels	6-8 months
Potatoes, mashed, instant flakes	1 year
Pretzels	6-8 months
Pudding, prepared/shelf-stable	1 week
Rice, brown	1 year
Rice, white	2 years
Rice-based mixes	6 months
Shortening, vegetable	8-12 months
Spices	Up to 4 years, whole spices Up to 2 years, ground spices Lose flavor over time but remain safe to use indefinitely
Stuffing mix	9-12 months
Sugar, brown (light or dark)	18 months
Sugar, confectioners	18 months
Sugar, white or substitute	2 or more years
Toaster pastries	6 months, fruit 9 months, no fruit
Tortillas	3 months, shelf or refrigerator 6 months, freezer Do not use if they develop mold or harden
Beverages	
Cocoa Mixes	3 years
Coffee creamer, liquid shelf-stable	9-12 months
Coffee creamer, powdered	2 years
Coffee, ground	2 years
Coffee, instant	1-2 years

Coffee, whole bean	1 year, vacuum-packed
Instant breakfast	6 months
Juice, bottle, shelf-stable	9 months
Juice, box	4-6 months
Juice, canned	18 months
Juice concentrate, shelf-stable	6 months
Milk, shelf-stable	1 year
Nutritional aid supplements: Boost, Ensure, etc.	1 year
Rice milk, shelf-stable	6 months
Carbonated beverages: soda, seltzer, water	3 months, bottles (all) 3 months, diet (cans) 9 months, regular soda, or seltzer (cans)
Soy milk, shelf-stable	6 months
Tea, bagged	18 months
Tea, instant	3 years
Tea, loose leaf	2 years
Water, unflavored and flavored	Indefinite; store in a cool, dark place

Tips on Storing Refrigerated Food:

- Keep all chilled food refrigerated at 40°F or below until distribution.
- Store eggs in their original carton.
- Leave space for air to circulate between items in the refrigerator.
- Rotate stock so that older foods are distributed first.
- Distribute milk 7 days before best by date.

Dairy and Cooler Items	Refrigerated (40°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Almond Milk	7 days	

Butter	2 months	1 year
Buttermilk	10-14 days	Does not freeze well
Cheese trays	2 weeks	Do not freeze
Cheese, cottage	10-15 days	Does not freeze well
Cheese, cream	2 weeks	Does not freeze well
Cheese, hard	6 months	6-8 months
Cheese, soft	1-2 weeks	6 months
Cheese, shredded	3-4 weeks	3-4 months
Coffee creamer, liquid refrigerated	2-3 weeks	Follow instructions on package
Cream, Half & Half	3-4 days	4 months; use for cooking
Cream, Heavy and light	10 days	3-4 months
Crust, pie, or pizza ready to bake	Sell-by date	2 months
Dips, made with sour cream	2 weeks	Do not freeze
Dough, biscuit, bread or pizza	Sell-by date	Do not freeze
Dough, cookie	Sell-by date	2-3 months
Eggs, in shell	4-5 weeks	Do not freeze
Eggs, pasteurized carton real and substitute eggs, unopened	7 days	1 year
Juice, purchased refrigerated	3 weeks	8-12 months
Margarine	6 months	12 months
Milk (not shelf-stable)	1 week (distribute 7 days before best by date)	1-3 months; use for cooking
Pudding, purchased refrigerated	1-2 days	Do not freeze
Salad dressing, refrigerated packets	3 months	Do not freeze
Sour cream	2-3 weeks	Do not freeze
Whipped cream, aerosol	3-4 weeks	Do not freeze
Whipped topping, aerosol	3 months	Do not freeze

Whipped topping, non-dairy tub	2 weeks	14 months; do not refreeze once thawed
Yogurt	10-14 days	1-2 months

Tips on Storing Frozen Food:

- If food remains continuously frozen, keep all frozen food at 0°F or below until distribution.
- Leave meat, poultry and seafood in the original packaging when distributing. It is unsafe to open and repack.

Items Received Frozen	Frozen (0°F or below)
Bread, Bagels	3 months
Chicken, Nuggets, Patties	2 months
Desserts, frozen baked goods	3-4 months
Desserts, frozen cream pies	1-2 months
Desserts, frozen fruit pies	6-8 months
Dinners: pies, casseroles, shrimp, ham, pork, or sausage	3-4 months
Dinners: beef, turkey, chicken, or fish	6 months
Dough, bread	1 month; longer storage inactivates yeast, weakens gluten
Dough, cookie	3 months
Pasteurized eggs in cartons	1 year, purchased frozen, unopened, never thawed
Fish, Breaded	4-6 months
Ice Pops	6 months
Fruit, frozen	4-12 months, quality suffers but safe to eat if continually frozen
Ice cream	2-4 months
Juice concentrate	2 years
Soy meat substitutes	12-18 months
Vegetables (including potato products), frozen	8-12 months, quality suffers but safe to eat if continually frozen
Waffles, pancakes	2 months
Whipped topping, non-dairy tub	6 months

Meats distributed through the Food Bank should be completely frozen and stored at 0°F or lower for as long as possible before distribution. Do not leave meat at room temperature.

Meats, Fresh	Refrigerated (40°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Fish/ Seafood, Raw		
Fatty fish: salmon, mackerel, perch, bluefish	2 days	3-6 months
Lean fish: cod, flounder, sole, haddock, pollock	2 days	12 months
Shrimp, raw	2 days	9 months
Crab, canned	6 months unopened; 5-7 days opened	Do not freeze
Crab, legs	3-5 days	9-12 months
Oysters, shucked	1-2 days	3-4 months
Lobster Tails, raw	4-5 days	6-9 months
Scallops, raw	1-2 days	3-6 months
Fish/ Seafood, Cooked		
Fatty Fish: salmon, mackerel, perch, bluefish	5-7 days	3-6 months
Lean Fish: cod, flounder, sole, haddock, pollock	5-7 days	3-6 months
Shrimp and other Shellfish	5-7 days	3-6 months
Meats, Raw	Quality may suffer with longer storage, but safe to eat indefinitely if continuously frozen	
Beef Roasts	3-5 days	1 year
Beef Steaks	3-5 days	1 year
Pork Roasts	3-5 days	1 year
Pork Chops	3-5 days	1 year
Lamb Roasts	3-5 days	1 year
Lamb Steaks/Chops	3-5 days	1 year
Poultry: Chicken or Turkey, whole cuts	2 days	1 year
Ground Meats: beef, pork, lamb, or poultry	2 days	9-12 months

Meats, Processed	Quality may suffer with longer storage, but safe to eat indefinitely if continuously frozen	
Bacon, unopened	2 weeks	6 months
Bacon, opened	1 week	2 months
Chicken, Fried	4 days	4 months
Chicken, Nuggets/Patties	2 days	3 months
Ham, unopened	2 weeks	1 year
Ham, opened	1 week	1-2 months
Hot Dogs, unopened	2 weeks	9 months
Luncheon Meats, deli-sliced or opened	3-5 days	Do not freeze
Luncheon Meats, unopened commercial package	2 weeks	1-2 months
Pepperoni, Salami	1 month	6 months
Sausage, raw	2 days	6 months
Sausage, smoked links, or patties	1 week	9 months

Prepared foods should be kept refrigerated until distributed. These foods are perishable and leaving them at room temperature will shorten their shelf life.

Prepared Items/ Deli Foods	Refrigerated (40°F or below)	Frozen (0°F or below)
Fruit, cut	Best by date	Do not freeze
Guacamole	3-4 days	3-4 months
Hummus, Pasteurized, with preservatives	3 months	Do not freeze
Hummus, traditional (no preservatives, not pasteurized)	7 days	Do not freeze
Main dishes, meals	3-4 days	2-3 months
Meats in gravy or broth	1-2 days	6 months
Pasta, fresh	1 week	1 month
Salads, prepared: macaroni, egg, potato, chicken, tuna, etc.	3-5 days	Do not freeze
Sauces, egg-based (Hollandaise, etc.)	10 days	Do not freeze

Side dishes, cooked vegetables	3-4 days	1-2 months
Side dishes, potato-based (not salad)	3-4 days	1-2 months
Side dishes, rice	3-4 days	1-2 months
Soups, Stews	2-3 days	2-3 months

Tips on Storing Fresh Produce: Always Check for Quality

- Most fruits and vegetables have the best quality when kept refrigerated. There are, however, some exceptions.
- Tomatoes taste best if not refrigerated. Cold storage can cause them to become mealy.
- Bananas should not be refrigerated unless fully ripe, and then they should be used within 1-2 days. Refrigeration will cause banana skin to blacken, but the fruit will not ripen while cold.
- Fresh apples, mangoes, and stone fruits (plums, peaches, etc.) can be stored at room temperature, but these items should be refrigerated as they ripen.
- Hardy vegetables like onions, garlic, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and winter squash can be stored in cool, dark places outside of the cooler.

Produce	Best quality from date purchased/received (refrigerated)
Fruits (always needs to be inspected for quality)	Discard if: 25% or more bruised, penetrating cuts, mushy, sprouting, gnaw marks, moldy, rancid
Apples	3-4 weeks
Apricots	2-5 days
Avocado	3-4 days
Banana	2 days after ripe (do not refrigerate)
Berries (all kinds)	2-3 days
Citrus fruit (lemons, oranges, limes, grapefruit etc.)	1-2 weeks
Grapes	1 week
Kiwi	3-6 days
Melons (cantaloupe, watermelon, honeydew etc.)	1-2 weeks
Papaya/Mango	1 week
Peaches, nectarines, pears, plums	3-5 days
Pineapple	5-7 days
Vegetables (always need to be inspected for quality)	
Asparagus	3-4 days
Bagged Greens (leaf, spinach, lettuce, Kale, etc.)	3-5 days
Beans (green, wax, snow, sugar snap)	3-5 days

Broccoli	3-5 days
Brussel Sprouts	3-5 days
Cabbage/Lettuce (head)	1 week
Carrots	2-3 weeks
Cauliflower	3-5 days
Celery	1-2 weeks
Cherry Tomato	5-7 days
Corn on the Cob	1-2 days
Cucumbers	4-5 days
Eggplant	1 week
Peppers	1 week
Leeks	1 week
Mushrooms	3-5 days
Onions - Green	1 week
Onions – Yellow, white, red	1-2 months
Peppers	4-7 days
Potatoes	1-2 months (not refrigerated)
Sprouts - Bean	5-7 days
Squash - Whole	1-2 weeks
Tomatoes	5-7 days after ripe
Yams/Sweet Potatoes	2-3 weeks (not refrigerated)
Zucchini	5-7 days