Harrisonville, MO

**Best by, Sell by, Use by, Oh MY!**

Some foods have labels to tell us when to purchase them, when to use them and when they are the freshest. All those dates on packaged foods can be confusing. Let’s break it down to help understand date labeling and what those dates mean for us as we purchase and use foods.

The University of Missouri publication: Better Living has an article that addresses the dates on labels. **Sell by date:** Tells the store how long to display the product for sale. Consumers should buy the product before that date. **Best if used by (or before) date:** Recommended for best flavor or quality. **Use by date:** The last date recommended by the manufacturer for use of the product while at its peak quality.

The key is to remember these are dates we should follow for peak quality of the product. Safety of the product relates back to how it has been handled and stored in processing, after purchasing and how prepared before consumption. If you ever wonder as to whether an item is safe to eat there is a simple saying: “When in doubt, throw it out.”

We all want to save money on our monthly food bills and yet we are aware that the dates mean we should be conscientious when purchasing items. The Natural Resources Defense Council states that 40% of the food raised in America goes uneaten equal to $165 Billion.
In a recent Food Safety News article: How to Use the ‘Best-By” Dates on Your Food, David Fikes, vice president of Consumer/Community Affairs and Communications for the Food Marketing Institute, was quoted as saying, “Once the food leaves the grocery store, they have no say in how it’s stored, so they use a date that takes into account the fact that the food may not be kept at the most optimal conditions."

A great example is one that happened to me recently. I purchased a gallon of milk, took it home and put in the refrigerator as soon as I was home. The milk lasted until the day before the date on the label. I had not stored the milk at optimal conditions for the ride home and it was an hour long ride in my not so air conditioned car.

Follow these simple steps to help you keep your food safe and last longer. When purchasing foods in hot weather take a cooler along to keep cold foods cold. Store as recommended storing cold items within 2 hours or as soon as possible. Clean your fresh foods before using. Keep raw meats separate from prepared foods. Cook to correct internal temperatures, and store as soon as you are finished with your meal.

Remember the dates on packaged food are for peak freshness and quality. And when in doubt about safety throw it out. This information should help you to purchase foods at peak freshness and save on your monthly food bills.

If you would like more information about food safety, food preservation or nutrition please contact me at MU Extension Center in Cass County: 816-380-8461.

*University of Missouri Extension provides equal opportunity to all participants in extension programs and activities, and for all employees and applicants for employment on the basis of their demonstrated ability and competence without discrimination on the basis of their race, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, genetics information, disability or status as a protected veteran.*