

Ignore Expiration Dates

"Best by," "Sell by," and all those other labels mean very little.

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There's a filet mignon in my fridge that expired four days ago, but it seems OK to me. I take a hesitant whiff and detect no putrid odor of rotting flesh, no oozing, fetid cow juice—just the full-bodied aroma of well-aged meat. A feast for one; I retrieve my frying pan. This is not an isolated experiment or a sad symptom of my radical frugality. With a spirit of teenage rebellion, I disavow any regard for expiration dates.

The fact is that expiration dates mean very little. Food starts to deteriorate from the moment it's harvested, butchered, or processed, but the rate at which it spoils depends less on time than on the conditions under which it's stored. Moisture and warmth are especially detrimental. A package of ground meat, say, will stay fresher longer if placed near the coldest part of a refrigerator (below 40 degrees Fahrenheit), than next to the heat-emitting light bulb. Besides, as University of Minnesota food scientist Ted Labuza explained to me, expiration dates address quality—optimum freshness—rather than safety and are extremely conservative. To account for all manner of consumer, manufacturers imagine how the laziest people with the most undesirable kitchens might store and handle their food, then test their products based on these criteria.

With perishables like milk and meat, most responsible consumers (those who refrigerate their groceries as soon as they get home, for instance) have a three-to-seven-day grace period after the "Sell by" date has elapsed. As for pre-packaged greens, studies show that nutrient loss in vegetables is linked to a decline in appearance. When your broccoli florets yellow or your green beans shrivel, this signals a depletion of vitamins. But if they haven't lost their looks, ignore the printed date. Pasta and rice will taste fine for a year. Unopened packs of cookies are edible for months before the fat oxidizes and they turn rancid. Pancake and cake mixes have at least six months. Canned items are potentially the safest foods around and will keep five years or more if stored in a cold pantry. Labuza recalls a seven-year-old can of chicken chunks he ate recently. "It tasted just like chicken," he said.