

Use by and best before dates

Use by dates are for ensuring safety and best before dates are for ensuring quality. Use by and best before dates are put on food labels to keep the consumer safe by allowing them to make informed decisions about the food and drink they are buying and consuming.

Use by dates are on perishable food products such as meat products and ready-prepared salads. They are important because food can smell, look and even taste normal but could still potentially contain pathogens that could make you sick. We cannot smell the difference between bugs that spoil food and those that make us ill. Foods should be eaten up until the use by date, but not after as they may no longer be safe to eat. Also food can be frozen up until the use by date but once defrosted use it within one day. In addition, the storage instructions must also be followed for the use by date to be valid e.g. “keep refrigerated” and “after opening eat within 3 days”.

Best before dates are less critical because they are concerned with food quality rather than safety. The food will still be safe to eat after this date but may not be at its best quality i.e. its flavour and texture might not be as good. Best before dates appear on a wide range of frozen, dried, tinned and other foods.

The provision of use by and best before dates by food manufacturers are a legal requirement. There are EU and national regulations in place to advise food producers on the rules regarding food labelling.

These are:

1. Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 on the provision of food information to consumers (FIC)
2. Food Information (Scotland) Regulations 2014 enable local authorities in Scotland to enforce the requirements

The regulations state that prepacked food must be labelled with a use by date or date of minimum durability (best before) AND any special storage conditions or conditions of use. For microbiologically perishable foods, a use by date is required. It is illegal for anyone to sell products after the expiry of their use by date.

The setting of use by dates are the responsibility of the food and drink manufacturer. In order to determine shelf life, a range of approaches can be taken, such as mathematical modelling or microbiological testing.

Microbiological testing involves storing the product under the required storage conditions and testing for relevant microorganisms at various points in time.

Listeria monocytogenes can grow or survive even in chilled conditions, therefore it's important that food business operators (FBOs) manage hygiene properly and apply a safe use by date to all ready to eat (RTE) products. As per Regulation (EC) No. 2073/2005 manufacturers must demonstrate, usually through shelf-life studies, that foods do not exceed the recognised limit of *Listeria* at any point during their shelf life or show complete absence at the point of manufacture.