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## What Does That Date Mean?

The United State Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that 30 percent of the food supply is lost or wasted at retail and consumer levels according to the website: <http://www.usda.gov/oce/foodwaste/sources>. Date labels are one source of confusion for consumers that result in food waste. The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service recommends that food manufacturers and retailers apply a “Best if Used By” date to product labels. This phrase conveys to consumers that the product will be best quality if used by the calendar date shown according to label date research.

As a consumer we are left to determine if a food is safe to eat or needs to be discarded due to spoilage or possible bacterial growth. The following list of food product codes or phrases will help consumers make an informed decision.

Date labeling of foods include:

- **Best if Used By/Before**
  - Indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.
- **Sell-By**
  - This date tells the store how long to display the product for sale and for inventory management. It is not a safety date.
- **Use-By**
  - The last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date.
  - **Unless it is on baby formula.** The use by date on baby formula ensures the formula contains the minimal amounts of nutrients as described on the label. **Baby formula should not be used after the Use-By date.**
- **Freeze-By**
  - Indicates when a product should be frozen to maintain peak quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

Foods that are handled properly, kept cold, and stored promptly after purchasing should be wholesome with little opportunity for bacterial spoilage. When signs of spoilage are evident then the food should be disposed of in a safe manner. Foods that are not kept cold will have a greater potential of bacterial growth. Most bacteria double every 15-20 minutes.

So, you may start with 1 bacterium and after an hour have 16 and the number of bacteria could grow to approximately 256 after two hours. Keeping cold foods cold will reduce the bacterial growth but not stop it completely.

Additional tips to reduce food waste include:

- Keep food date labels in mind when purchasing foods to use foods in a reasonable amount of time.
- Store foods in the freezer if you will not be able to consumer them before they spoil.
- Avoid bulk or impulse purchases on food with a limited shelf life.
- Check foods for spoilage before eating.

Food labels can be confusing but with a little practice understanding the label will help reduce the amount of food waste. Knowing What Does That Label Mean will also help keep money in your pocket instead of your compost or garbage bin.

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