

BEST IF USED BY GUIDANCE INVENTORY CONTROL IN SCHOOLS

Q: How can I effectively manage my inventory to ensure quality products are being served?

A: The most basic rule of inventory management is first-in-first-out (FIFO). You can achieve an acceptable level of accuracy by **marking the cases, or individual cans/packages, with the date you receive them and practicing FIFO**. Another important rule for inventory management is adjusting orders carefully to reflect your level of usage. Try to order just what you need to serve your customers and order for delivery just when you need it. You will have less inventory to manage, and you will significantly reduce the risk of product going out of condition. Excessive inventory increases the risk of product going out of condition.

Storage conditions have a significant impact on the quality of food products. The same product will last for different periods of time depending on the temperature of the storeroom, the humidity level, and air circulation. In general, cool temperatures and low humidity provide the best storage conditions. Store food off the floor and away from contact with walls and ceilings.

Q: How can I tell when a product has gone out of condition? Is there a single date I can refer to?

A: Experts disagree on how long a product can be kept in storage before it goes out of condition. There is no single date before which most products must be used, and after which they must not be used. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. The exception is infant formula. Infant formula and some baby foods are unique in that they absolutely must not be used after the "use-by" date that appears on the case and unit.

Some commercial products may display recommended quality dates. A "**best-if-used-by**" date means that the manufacturer recommends using the product by this date for the best flavor or quality. At some point after that date, the product will change *very gradually* in taste, color, texture, or nutrient content. But, the product may be wholesome and safe long after that date. You may also see a "**sell-by**" date on a food product. This means the manufacturer recommends that a store sell the product by that date. It is assumed that the product may then be stored for some period of time before it is used. Therefore, a "sell-by" date would be reached earlier in the life of a product than a "best-if-used-by" date. **These various dating systems do not represent expiration dates, and they do not indicate when product safety becomes an issue.**

Q: How can I tell if a product is safe to eat?

A: Absent any defects in packaging or obvious signs of spoilage and assuming proper storage, you can be reasonably confident that products are wholesome and safe.

If you have reason to question the wholesomeness or safety of a food product, open a case or individual package and carefully examine the cans or packages for rust, bulging, broken seals, insect infestation or other visible defects. **If any of these conditions are present, the food is generally considered NOT fit for human consumption.**

If there are no visible signs of spoilage, but you have reason to question the quality of the product, a sensory evaluation would be appropriate. The food should be opened, defrosted (if necessary), and cooked (if necessary). Observe the overall condition of the food including color, texture, and smell. If the food displays acceptable color, texture, and smell, you must use your best judgment regarding the quality of the food and whether or not to serve it. **DO NOT** taste any food that you have reasonable basis to suspect is unwholesome or unsafe.

If, based on this inspection, you have any doubt regarding wholesomeness or safety of the product, (1) have local health authorities inspect it as soon as possible, and (2) make sure that it cannot be accidentally used or distributed in the meantime. If the health inspector suspects or discovers problems, immediately contact your State agency or, if you are a State agency, your FNS Regional Office for further instructions.