

labels, a leading expert explains how to tell for yourself if food is fresh have 'sell-by paranoia?

'It's up to the consumer if they want to eat food past its BB date,' says a spokesman for the Food Standards Agency (FSA). 'It only indicates that the food will not be at its best.'

'However, UB dates are useful. The manufacturer will have placed this information on the label to show when a food could cause food poisoning if eaten, especially important for children, the elderly and pregnant women.'

However, FSA food safety microbiologist Robert Martin says: 'Food labelling was introduced in Britain in 1980 and while it remains an important indicator of freshness, there was no significant reduction in levels of food-poisoning after it was required by law.'

Prior to this, people simply had to feel, look and

smell their food to gauge whether they were putting themselves at risk of food poisoning.

'Use-by dates are there to protect the consumer,' says Dr Lisa Ackerley, of Hygiene Audit Systems and visiting professor of environmental health at Salford University. 'But there are some areas where using our senses would save a lot of money without risking our health.'

So how do you tell if food is fresh or not, without relying solely on the label? We asked Dr Ackerley to assess a typical weekly shop, bought on Wednesday, May 4. She looked at the quality of the produce, gave her verdicts as to whether the dates on the labels were reasonable and correct, and in some cases provided an alternative date. The results make surprising reading.



CRACKING TIP: If an egg floats, it really has gone off and could make you ill

goes off, as mould grows, and at this point it needs to be thrown away.'



CHEESE
UB JULY 14
ALTERNATIVE DATE
SEPTEMBER 14 IF UNOPENED

The packaging is good and will prevent contamination and retain moisture. I don't worry about the UB date on hard cheeses such as parmesan as it is very acidic and salty so they do not provide an environment for bacteria to proliferate.

Even if left out, this cheddar should last for a couple of weeks, and wrapped securely in cling film and refrigerated there is nothing to say this won't be good in a month's time.

Bacteria can be introduced by cutting it. If mould grows and you want to cut that bit away, make sure you remove at least an inch as fungal toxins penetrate this far, although these won't give you serious food poisoning.

Soft cheese, such as brie, can contain listeria so always follow the UB guidance and keep refrigerated. If you want to serve it runny, take it out a few hours

before serving but don't leave it for more than four hours at room temperature.



EGGS
BB MAY 12
ALTERNATIVE DATE
NONE GIVEN

Eggs should not be eaten more than 21 days after laying because salmonella bacteria multiplies.

As eggs age, the air sac inside expands because water evaporates, which can cause the egg to float in water - putting one in a bowl of water and seeing if it floats or not can usually tell you if an egg is edible.

If you crack one open that has gone off, it will smell sulphurous and foul. However, BB dates on eggs must be read in the same way as UB dates on other foods as the risk of salmonella poisoning is present regardless of how it smells or behaves in water.



BANANAS
BB MAY 6
ALTERNATIVE DATE
MAY 20 AT LEAST

Take no notice of the BB date. Having them on fruits and vegetables is pointless. I have a mango that's a month out of date and it's fine. These bananas are very firm and will still be, come the BB date.

It is obvious when fruit and veg is not edible as it becomes squidgy, mouldy and smells bad, although even then it won't do you much harm, and tired looking vegetables are useful to make stock.

The only exception is a potato that has developed green patches or is sprouting. This is caused by toxins which on rare occasions can cause food poisoning. Don't be tempted to cut away just the green bits, it could be all the way through.



TOMATOES
BB MAY 6
ALTERNATIVE DATE
JULY 6

These feel very firm, and it is ridiculous they are supposed to be past their best in two days' time. Even if they start to shrivel, they are still fine to cook with and pose no health risk. If refrigerated, they should last at least two months if not more.



BREAD
BB MAY 7
ALTERNATIVE DATE
MAY 14

This is fresh, so the idea that it will be past its best in three days' time could be wasteful. It will easily be good to eat, although perhaps a little harder, a week later. Stale bread can be great for cooking as breadcrumbs, for example. However, once mouldy bin it. Other baked goods such as cakes and biscuits have a far longer shelf life. They contain preservatives and sugar, which locks in moisture and prevents bacteria from proliferating.



PASTA SPAGHETTI
BB JAN 2013
ALTERNATIVE DATE
2023

All dried food such as sugar, salt, flour, rice and pasta should last years longer than the BB date as long as it is kept in an airtight container.

Once moisture is introduced the food will start to deteriorate. Pasta might go a milky colour after a few years which is due to moisture, but it will do no harm.

Occasionally mites might invade your flour but won't do any harm although the idea of baking with bugs might not be terribly appetising.

The rules of refrigeration

For storing meat, the fridge's temperature should be kept at 5C. Any warmer and bacteria will grow quite rapidly, and food may even spoil before the UB date.

It is essential that red meat and poultry are stored on the shelf below ready-to-eat foods so any bacteria present is not transferred to other foods via dripped fluid.

Scombrotoxic fish - tuna, herring and mackerel - must be very fresh and

kept below 3C. They contain natural bacteria that produce toxins that can survive cooking, and can make you very ill. Never eat it past the UB date.

As long as the freezer is between -18C and -23C, food should last for ever, although the taste may deteriorate.

A chicken put in the freezer that had many days left before its UB date will be safe to eat for about two days after defrosting.



JAM
BB FEB 2013
ALTERNATIVE DATE
2113

Left unopened this will last for ever, hundreds of years. Once opened, as long as it doesn't become covered in mould, it should be fine to eat. Mould only grows on these preserved products due to spores introduced by cutlery. If you use a clean spoon, it should prevent this from happening so quickly.

Refrigerating slows any mould growth, so is advised if you're not going to eat it quickly, but it isn't essential even if it says so on the packaging. Food such as jams and chutneys should last longer than the label says once open, and if a spot of mould appears, scoop it out and eat what lies below. However, as soon as the food becomes furry you must throw it out as it will contain harmful toxins.

Tinned foods may have a BB date but will last for ever if unopened. The flavour may change after 20 years, but the contents will be safe. Unopened jars of food will last for ever.

However, never eat food from punctured tins as it may be infected with bacteria.

in law

Trading Standards spokesman.

The law does not state length of use-by dates. However, firms can be fined up to £5,000 for a 'food labelling offence'.

Some foods are marked with sell-by or display-until dates, used for stock control purposes by retailers and are not for the customer.

All caterers are legally obliged to sell food within its use-by date.

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