



## Time to Toss It?

Beyond the “best by” date doesn’t mean food is bad – but be cautious.

**Two-week old yogurt? Milk that expired four days ago? Sardines past their “sell by” date?** Is a food that has outlived its expiration date OK to eat?

Chances are, it is. The dates on your groceries indicate only when a product is at peak quality, not whether it’s safe to eat, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

### WHAT LABELS MEAN

In most cases, food manufacturers label foods to manage inventory and quality. A “sell by” date is a guide for a store to replace older products with new ones. A “use by” date lets consumers know when a food will be past its peak quality. “Best if used by” indicates when a food product is at its best quality or most flavorful.

“Just because a food is past its expiration date does not mean eating it will make you sick or cause any health

effects,” says registered dietitian Lona Sandon, PhD, assistant professor of clinical nutrition at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. “Canned foods are a good example of this. The expired can of food will likely be safe to eat; just the quality of taste, texture and nutrients may not be as good.”

It’s up to consumers to check for an “off” odor, flavor or texture that indicates spoilage, although even this doesn’t mean you’ll get sick from eating it unless bad bacteria are present.

### WHEN TO BEWARE

If the product has been opened, that’s a different story, especially for people who have inflammatory arthritis. It could become contaminated with bacteria that lead to gastrointestinal (GI) problems, like diarrhea or vomiting, Sandon says. “GI infection as a result

## Simpler Labels

The Consumer Goods Forum (CGF), which represents 400 consumer goods producers, including mega companies like Nestlé and Walmart, from 70 countries, has committed to simplifying expiration labels by 2020 in an effort to reduce food waste. According to CGF, the average U.S. household with children tosses out about \$1,500 in food each year. It proposes to use just two labels – something along the lines of “use by” for perishable foods and “best if used by” for non-perishable items.

of this bacteria can cause inflammation throughout the body. This could potentially make someone’s arthritis symptoms worse until the infection is resolved,” she adds.

### STAY SAFE

Sandon’s advice? Store foods, particularly meats and dairy, at the proper temperatures (lower than 40 F), and use safe food preparation practices. For example, wash your hands before, during and after handling foods, cook meats to 165 F, and don’t use the same utensils and cutting boards for raw foods as for cooked foods. —NICHOLE BAZEMORE