



## Healthy Measures: What does the “Best Before” date on food packaging really mean?

The best before date on food packaging is the period of time that the food will retain its taste and nutritional value, when stored properly.

Best before dates must appear on pre-packaged foods that will keep fresh for 90 days or less. It is a quality based date label and is not a relevant food safety indicator as food will generally decline in quality before there is an increase in the level of food safety risk.

What you should know about best before dates:

- Best before dates only apply to unopened foods and once opened should be consumed rapidly.
- Foods susceptible to spoilage, such as milk, cheese, etc., should not be consumed if the best before date has passed.
- If the food is not maintained at the proper temperature, the best before date will not be accurate. In some cases, a food product may not be safe within the given best before date.
- In general, non-perishable foods such as crackers, canned foods, and cereal may be consumed up to one year after the best before date if the packaging is not open or damaged.
- Questions regarding the safety of a product that has passed its best before date should be directed to the manufacturer of the product.

### Best before dates, storage and handling of food

It is important to consider best before dates when storing and handling potentially hazardous foods. Potentially hazardous foods are those that support bacterial growth because they are rich in protein and have a high moisture content. Potentially hazardous foods include dairy products, meat, fish, poultry, eggs, and some raw and cooked fruits and vegetables (e.g., bean sprouts, garlic in oil and sliced fruit).

Controlling the temperatures at which potentially hazardous food is kept at, and the length of time food is kept at those temperatures, is vital to minimizing bacterial growth. By taking steps to minimize bacterial growth, many foods will be safe past the best before date.

If the product is not maintained at the proper temperature, the best before date is not accurate. In some cases, a food product may not be safe within the given best before date. For example, *Listeria* can survive and sometimes grow on food stored in the refrigerator. *Listeria* is more likely to live in some foods than others. Higher risk foods include raw or contaminated milk, soft cheeses, and ready to eat meat such as hot dogs, pâté and non-dry deli meats such as chicken breast, bologna and ham.

For more information on safe food handling, visit [www.york.ca/foodsafety](http://www.york.ca/foodsafety) or contact Health Connection at 1-800-361-5653.

**For more information, call York Region *Health Connection* at 1-800-361-5653, TTY 1-866-252-9933.**