For Quality's Sake, Don't Ignore Food Labels

By Ruth Kava — August 11, 2016

We all know about nutrition facts labels on foods — whether we use them or not. But what about those other labels? You know, the ones that say 'sell by' or 'use by.' Is it safe to ignore them? Does the government mandate their appearance on foods? Those labels are about food quality rather than safety. Here's a rundown of currently used labels according to the USDA [1]:

- **Sell by**: This tells the store how long it can offer an item for sale before the quality declines. Milk and other dairy products typically carry sell by dates. If you buy fresh milk on the sell by date, don't expect it to remain fresh for more than a week.
- **Best if used by (or before)**: If you want the best quality (and maybe the best nutrition), pay attention to this date. Again, it's not a safety issue.
- **Use by**: A date which the manufacturer determines is the latest for peak quality of that item.

The labels above are usually 'open' labels, meaning they are calendar dates that anyone can read. There are also so-called 'closed' labels — numerical/letter codes that are often seen on canned foods. These refer to the date the item was manufactured. Canned items also may have open codes.

Of course safety issues are important, even if the labels above don't relate to safety. The USDA makes the following recommendations to keep foods safe:

- Purchase the product before the date expires.
- If perishable, take the food home immediately after purchase and refrigerate it promptly.
- Freeze it if you can't use it soon or wish to postpone use.
- Once a perishable product is frozen, it doesn't matter if the date expires because foods kept frozen continuously are safe indefinitely.
- Follow handling recommendations on product.

A problem with the quality food labels is that there is no uniform standard from state to state on the format for these labels, although legislation is being considered to deal with that issue. However, they still will not deal with food safety issues.

This is understandable, since much of food safety is in the hands of consumers. Improper storage
can accelerate food deterioration (i.e., leaving milk on the counter for hours before refrigerating it). And improper handling can certainly affect food safety — not washing hands, using contaminated utensils, cross-contaminating salad materials with bacteria from raw meats, for example. It's usually safe to consume a food after the use by date, or we'd have a lot of sick dumpster divers around; it depends on which food and how perishable it is.

So, are there no food safety labels? Only for infant formula, and those labels are federally mandated, and must be passed by the FDA. If the formula is used after the 'Use by' date, the concern is that it may have deteriorated in quality and might not still contain the correct quantity of nutrients listed on the label. Further, if an out-of-date formula deteriorates, it can separate and clog the nipple on a baby bottle.

Understanding what food labels mean and buying appropriately can improve food quality (and nutrition in some cases) and increase our enjoyment.

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH


Links