



Section 5, Date Labelling

In this section, you will learn:

- ▶ What is the difference between minimum durability and the use by date?
- ▶ How is the date indicated?

Depending on the product, the date may be either the date of minimum durability (“best before”) or the ‘use by’ date.

Date of minimum durability or “best before” date

The date of minimum durability refers to the date until which the food retains its specific properties when properly stored, such as taste and structure. The food may be sold or used after this date as long as its quality has not substantially worsened.

In this case, responsibility for the food’s quality rests with the seller or supplier.

To prevent consumers from accidentally buying food that is past its best before date, this should be indicated when the product is sold or supplied.

Indicating the date of minimum durability

The date of minimum durability is preceded by the words “best before” or “best before end”, after which the date is labelled as follows:

Durability of the food	Accuracy of the date	For example
up to 3 months	day and month	“best before 31 Dec”
more than 3 months and up to 18 months	month and year	“best before end Dec 2020”
more than 18 months	year	“best before end 2020”
all durability times listed above	day, month and year	“best before 31 Dec 2020”

The date of minimum durability is always indicated in the order day, month and year. If the date is indicated only by month and year or year, the word “end” must precede the date, such as in “best before end 2020”.

The date may also be indicated elsewhere on the packaging than immediately after the “best before” label. In this case, the words must indicate where on the package the date is situated, such as in “best before” – see cap.

Frozen foods always use the “best before” date.

Use-by date or expiration date

The use-by date or expiration date refers to the final date after which the food should not be used.

The use-by date is indicated on microbiologically highly perishable foods that may be dangerous to health already when stored for short periods of time.

These include the following types of food, unless their preservation has been ensured by means of heat treatment or preservatives:

1. Raw milk and products thereof
2. Egg products
3. Fresh meat, organs, blood and fresh plasma
4. Minced meat and other uncooked meat products
5. Fresh fish, roe and crustaceans
6. Fresh-salted and cold-smoked fish
7. Ready-cooked foods, desserts and confectionery that have not been heat-treated

Other products than those listed above may be highly perishable from a microbiological point of view, in which case their use-by date must be indicated. In such cases, the operator must evaluate on a case-by-case basis whether the food is highly perishable microbiologically.

These foods may not be sold or used to prepare foods for sale or serving after the use-by date.

Indicating the use-by date

The use-by date is indicated in the packaging preceded by the words “use by”, followed by the date consisting of the day, the month and, possibly, the year, in that order.

For example

- use by 27 Sep
- use by 27 Sep 2020

The label must also include instructions on how the product should be stored.

Other things to note

Batch number

If the date is accurate to at least the day and month, it may also be used as the number for the food batch. The batch number is discussed in more detail in Section 9, Other mandatory information.

Non-prepacked foods the date of minimum durability or use-by date does not have to be indicated for non-prepacked foods, unless specifically required by the food’s storage instructions.

For further information, see sections 6.7 and 7.1 of the Food Information Guide for Food Supervisors and Food Operators (in Finnish and Swedish).

You can test your knowledge with the revision exercises found in Section 11 of this guide.

Summary

- ▶ The use-by date must be indicated for foods that are highly perishable from a microbiological point of view. The food may not be sold or used after this date.
- ▶ In the case of the best before date, the food may be sold or used after this date as long as its quality has not substantially worsened. In such cases, you are still responsible for the food’s quality as a food business operator.