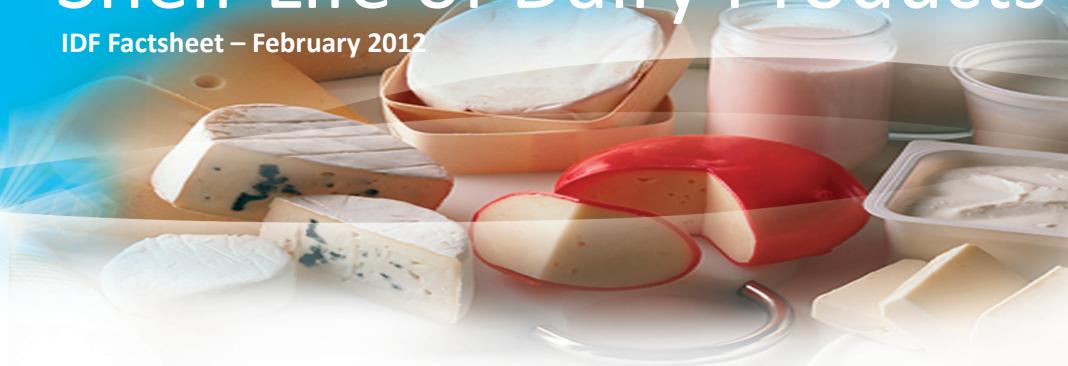




Shelf-Life of Dairy Products

IDF Factsheet – February 2012



Product shelf-life information on pre-packaged foods plays an important role in consumers' choices at the time of buying or consuming a food product. Shelf-life can provide consumers with information on product quality, safety and convenience.

What Is Shelf-life?

Shelf-life is a guide for consumers on the period of time that a food can be kept in storage before it starts to deteriorate or becomes unsafe, provided proper storage conditions have been followed. In particular, as is the case for many foods, temperature control during storage is critical.

The shelf-life of any food product begins as soon as the product is manufactured. Shelf-life can be greatly affected by factors such as quality of raw materials, manufacturing processes, packaging, transportation and storage conditions of the finished products.

Food manufacturers use different terminologies to express how long a food will retain its quality and microbiological safety. Expressions such as "*Best Before*", "*Use by*", "*Sell by*", "*Date of Manufacture*" or "*Date of packaging*" are often used by food processors and can lead to misinterpretations by consumers.

A general explanation of these terms and other useful labelling information can help consumers better understand the shelf-life of dairy products.



"*Best Before*" or "*Durable Life*" Date

The "*best before*" or "*durable life*" date expresses the expected amount of time that an unopened package, when stored under appropriate conditions, will retain its freshness, taste, nutritional value or any other characteristic claimed by the manufacturer. A food which is past its "*Best before*" date may not necessarily be dangerous to consume but it may no longer be of the highest quality. Therefore, a "*best before*" date doesn't relate to food safety.

The "*best before*" date not only provides information about the freshness of the product (i.e. indication of how old it is or when it was produced), but also states the expected shelf-life of the unopened package of a dairy product.



"Use by" Date

In many countries, the "use by" date will indicate the date until which the product can be safely consumed. Therefore, unlike the best before date, the precise determination of the "use by" date is crucial to guarantee product safety. This wording is used for highly perishable foods that will present a safety risk if consumed after the specified date. However, in some countries (e.g., USA) the "use by" date usually refers to optimum quality and does not pertain to safety.

In countries where this format is used for food safety purposes, it is recommended that a food be neither sold nor consumed if it is past its "use by" date.

Raw milk is a good example of a dairy product that is considered perishable to a degree that triggers the application of the "use by" date.



Other Code Dates Expressions

Manufactures might use other terminologies such as "Sell by", "Date of manufacture", "Date of packaging" or "Packed on" for tracking or stocking purposes. Codex General Standard for the labelling of pre-packaged foods (1) defines some of the previously mentioned terms as follows.

"Date of manufacture" is the date on which the food becomes the product as described.

"Date of packaging", also known as "Packed on", is the date on which the food is placed in the immediate container in which it will be ultimately sold.

"Sell by" is the last date of offer for sale to the consumer after which there remains reasonable storage information period in the home.



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