**Myth-Busting Expiration Dates**

**Lesson Time:** 15 minutes

**Supplies**: PowerPoint

**Background:**

Each year 40% of food produced and purchased in the US goes to waste and 43% of that can be traced back to our homes. A national survey completed by Harvard, Johns Hopkins and the National Consumers League showed that an important driver of household food waste is confusion over date labels. Here’s the truth: there is no federal regulation of date labels and when present, state-level regulations are often inconsistent.

Manufacturers provide dating to help consumers and retailers decipher when food is at its best quality. Depending on the product, many foods will still be good to eat days, weeks, or months after the dates we see on food items. According to an industry study cited on Save the Food.com, 90% of people occasionally throw away food too soon and over half of us do it regularly.

Due to the blind trust consumers put on date labels and our assumptions that manufacturers “know best”, we tend to forgo our desire to not waste food or money. To help consumers of all ages reduce food waste, it is important to understand that the dates we see on food are for quality and not safety purposes.

**Resources:**

<https://furtherwithfood.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/FCFoodDateLabels.pdf>

<https://savethefood.com/articles/deciphering-dates-on-products>

<https://furtherwithfood.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Food-Product-Dating.pdf>

<https://furtherwithfood.org/resources/consumer-perceptions-of-date-labels-national-survey/>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/04/people-waste-more-food-than-they-think-psychology/>

**Goal**: By taking a deeper look at what is guiding their decisions when choosing whether or not to eat something and learning about the different types of expiration date labels, students will gain insight on how to reduce the waste of potentially safe food at home.

**Activity:** PowerPoint with “The (Food) Dating Game: Which Would You Eat?” activity

Introduction and Activity (5 minutes)

*Explain to students that they will be looking at pictures of normal, everyday food products we buy from the store and information surrounding their expiration dates. The students will be deciding how they would, in normal circumstances at home, handle the food items with the information given.*

*With each slide, launch a poll and share results with the class:*

*Which food item would you eat? A) Left B) Right C) Both D) Neither*

Group Debrief (5 minutes)

*Take 2-3 minutes to debrief on the students’ choices:*

* *What guided your decisions? (ex. fear of getting sick, disgust with expired food, desire to not waste food, appearance, date label, packaged vs. unpackaged)*
* *Did you have all the information you needed to decide if you would eat an item or not?*

*Use remaining time in this section (2-3 minutes) to tell the class how long each food product typically lasts after expiration date.*

*Answers (see “Food Expiration Date Guide” for recommendations for other food items):*

* *Bread – 5 to 7 days after expiration date at room temperature (or until you see mold- because bread is a soft food, mold travels easily).*
  + *In PowerPoint: both loaves of bread still look good.*
* *Hard Cheese – May last 2 to 4 weeks past expiration date. Mold can’t penetrate into hard cheeses (such as cheddar or swiss), therefore a moldy piece or corner can easily be removed while the remaining cheese can safely be eaten.*
  + *In PowerPoint: packaged sliced cheese still seems good, cheese without packaging is questionable. Both should be checked for any mold. Use your senses!*
* *Eggs – Should be eaten within 3 to 5 weeks of purchasing (no matter the date on the carton).*
  + *In PowerPoint: both eggs should be safe to eat.*
* *Lettuce (veggies) - General rule of thumb is if it’s rotten don’t eat it; but even wilted veggies should be fine to eat, just cook them instead*
  + *In PowerPoint: check both before using. Individual head of lettuce should be still good, but packaged salad mix could be rotten.*
* *Yogurt – May last up to 1 to 2 weeks past expiration date when sealed.*
  + *In PowerPoint: yogurt in Tupperware should be looked at and smelled before eating. Store bought yogurt may still be good, but should also be inspected just in case.*

*If it doesn’t come up naturally in group discussion, ask students if they would have investigated the item (touched/felt or smelled the item) when deciding the fate of the food at home. Ask if anyone noticed the different phrasing of expiration dates in the description under the photos. Did this impact their decision at all (maybe unconsciously)? (Use this as a transition into presentation material)*

**PowerPoint talking points:**

Slide 7 – Where do You Stack Up? (2 minutes)

According to multiple studies, American’s throw away around $29 billion of safe food every year due to the confusion over “best by,” “sell by,” “use by” and other date labels. In a national study done by Harvard, Johns Hopkins and the National Consumers League, it was also found that one third of the population says that they always or usually throw away food because it is close to or past the date that appears on the package, while 84% of consumers throw out food based on date labels at least occasionally.

In the same study it was found that 36% of the population wrongly answered that date labels are federally regulated, and 26% were unsure. Currently, there are no federal standards on how most food should be dated. The only food which date labels are regulated for is infant formula. For most of our food products, manufacturers conduct tests to determine how long products take to go bad, then select a date range well before that point. This “safety margin”, though, is at the manufacturer’s discretion and not consistent across companies.

Slide 8 – What do expiration dates actually mean? (1 minute)

The food expiration dates we see have nothing to do with safety, but rather are the manufacturers’ best estimate of quality - when the product is at its freshest. Does anyone want to try to explain the difference between these 3 dates? *Students may be unmuted to answer.*

* Use-by = indicates when food should be used to ensure best taste and quality. Foods past this date may not taste as fresh, but may still be edible.
* Best-by = the date that food will be at optimal quality. This doesn’t necessarily mean that the food is unsafe to eat after this date.
* Sell-by = guidelines for retailers to know when food will be at its best quality. Because these dates are designed to build in quality, in most instances these foods will maintain their shelf life after this date.

Slide 9 – The True Expiration Date (1 minute)

The main question you may be thinking is “if the expiration date doesn’t tell you when food goes bad, how do you know it’s still good?”

One way to evaluate food safety is by taking a look at how the food is stored. If food was left out on the counter or in a hot car for too long, it could become unsafe to eat before the date on the package. It is important to keep most foods out of the temperature “danger zone” (40 to 120 °F) for long periods of time.

You can also extend the life of food by freezing it. This essentially hits the pause button on your food. Almost any type of food can be frozen – meat, milk, eggs, bread, cheese and even unused pasta sauce.

Overall, the best way to determine if food is safe is to use your senses - sense of smell, taste and touch. If you find that the food smells off, tastes strange or has an unusual texture, it is best to avoid it!

Slide 10 – It starts at home! (1 minute)

It is important to note that we can still use dates as a basis for how long our food will last, but do not take them as the end all be all.

Ultimately, food products are safe to consume past the date on the label, and regardless of the date, we should take time to evaluate the quality of our food before we use or eat it.

After school today, check out what’s in your fridge, pantry or on your kitchen counter. Tell your family what you know the next time you’re all cleaning out your fridge or see them throw something away – it helps to have everyone on the same page. Take a moment to review how you and your family view expiration dates and see if you can help prevent unneeded food waste starting in your own home! To prevent food waste even further, consider looking into composting inedible food and scraps. *(For more information on the benefits of composting, refer to the “Carbon Culprits” lesson plan).*