

# Safe & Healthy Food for Your Family

Division of Extension

## Latest research: food label confusion leads to food waste



Research to be published in the September 2020 issue of *Food Control* confirms that consumers are wasting food due to confusion over food product dating. An online survey of 1042 U.S. adults evaluated **consumers' use and knowledge of food label dates**, and **consumers' habits related to disposing of food** that would likely still be safe for consumption.

The age and gender of the individuals surveyed closely resembled the make-up in the U.S. population: 46% men and 54% women were surveyed, with ages falling in the groups 18-29 (25%), 30-44 (23%), 45-60 (33%) and over 60 (18%). The only way in which the individuals surveyed did not mimic the U.S. population was in income category; study participants were much more likely to report earnings of \$50,000 per year or higher.

Study participants were asked to correctly respond to **food product dating terms**:

- “**Best by/use by**” – indicates when the food is it's freshest/peak quality (not a safety date)
- “**Sell by**” – indicates the last day the product should be sold (not a safety date)
- “**Expiration date**” – indicates the food should not be consumed after the date (may be a safety date)
  - See important information on [product dating and infant formula](#)

### What were the study results?

- Across all categories, the majority of study participants (82%) reported ‘**smelling**’ and ‘**looking**’ at a food product as a way to determine if the product was edible.
- The **primary reason** that food was disposed of in preparation was due to **burning** or otherwise ‘**ruining**’ the food (64%).
- Most study participants (58%) would throw away a food that had **not ‘gone bad’** but still ‘**wasn’t worth the risk.**’
- Study participants indicated they would **throw away a food** that had past the ‘**best by**’ date (30%), the ‘**use by**’ date (50%) or the ‘**sell by**’ date (21%).
- Consumers who knew the **correct definition of food product dates** were **less likely to waste** potentially edible food and were more likely to know that only an ‘expiration date’ indicated a safety date on some products.

**What can we learn?** Supporting consumers in [understanding food product dating](#) can have a positive impact on **reducing food waste without negatively impacting food safety** while, at the same time, helping consumers to stretch their food dollars.

See recent [updates](#) on this topic and links to resources such as the [FoodKeeper App](#). Stay well and food-safe, Barb

Ref. *Food Control* <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodcont.2020.107285>

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