

Labelling

9 May 2006

What is contained on a food label?

The Food Standards Code includes provisions relating to labelling. A food label must identify:

- a **name for the food**;
- the **identification of a 'lot'** of the food;
- **name and street address in Australia** of the supplier of the food (eg. the manufacturer, marketer or importer);
- a **list of the ingredients**;
- a statement of the **shelf-life of the product**, either a 'use-by' or a 'best-before' date;
- the **nutrition information panel (NIP)**, with the content of the basic nutrients contained in the food, per serving and also per 100g of that food. (See related fact sheet *Nutrition Information Labelling* for further details);
- the **country of origin** of the product and its ingredients; and
- **warning and advisory statements** about substances (eg. nuts) that may be harmful to people with allergies and food sensitivities. (See related fact sheet *Food Allergies and Intolerances* for further details).

'Use by' and 'best before' dates

Why are 'use by' and 'best before' dates printed on foods?

Date-marking - 'use by' and 'best before' - provide consumers with a guide about the shelf life of food.

Date-marking informs consumers about the amount of time food can be kept before it begins to deteriorate.

All food with a shelf life of less than two years must be date-marked.

In some circumstances, date-marking can also inform consumers about how long a food can be expected to remain safe.

Some consumers are confused about the difference between 'use by' and 'best before'.

This fact sheet will help clear up any misunderstanding.

What does 'use by' mean?

Foods that are marked with a 'use by' date must be eaten or thrown away by that date.

This is because food may be unsafe to eat after the 'use by' date expires, even though spoiling may not be visible.

Also, nutrients in the food may become unstable after the 'use by' date expires, which can have an adverse affect on the health of people who are ill or unable to eat typical food.

It is important to note that foods date-marked 'use by' cannot be sold after this date because the food could pose a health or safety risk.

Common examples of foods frequently marked 'use by' included perishables such as ready-to-eat chilled foods like milk, sliced ham, some small goods and shaved meats. This also includes special dietary foods that provide the sole source of nutrition.

What does 'best before' mean?

Foods marked 'best before' are safe to be consumed *provided the food is otherwise fit for human consumption*.

These foods can be expected to retain their colour, taste, texture and flavour provided they have been stored correctly.

It is important to note that foods date-marked 'best before' can continue to be sold after the date, provided the food is not damaged, deteriorated or perished.

Common examples of foods frequently marked 'best before' include canned foods, cereals, biscuits, sauces, chocolate, sugar, flour and frozen foods.

What can I do?

The best thing consumers can do is check to make sure any date-marked foods they purchase are well within their 'use by' or 'best before' dates.

Understanding the difference between 'use by' and 'best before' will help clear up any misunderstanding.

What should I do if I discover food being sold beyond its 'use by' date?

It is against the law to sell food that is damaged, deteriorated or perished, regardless of whether it is within its specified date-mark or not.

If you find food being sold past its 'use by' date, contact the store manager.

Often it is nothing more than an innocent oversight on the behalf of the retailer.

You should definitely contact management and the Food Authority if 'use by' dates have been deliberately altered, scratched out or another date sticker placed over the original.

The NSW Food Authority will take action against any retailer that knowingly sells unsafe food, or sells food beyond its 'use by' date.

Country of origin labelling

What is country of origin labelling?

Country of origin labelling describes the country or countries where the food was grown, manufactured or packaged. Country of origin labelling is not required for foods sold by restaurants, canteens, caterers or self-catering institutions where the food will be immediately eaten.

Country of origin labelling for packaged food

A statement on the package must clearly state where the food was made or produced, or identified as packaged for retail sale. Product for retail sale must be identified as having imported or local or a mixture of local and imported produce.

Labelling of unpackaged food

Some unpackaged foods (eg. fresh and processed fish, fresh and processed pork, and fresh and processed fruits and vegetables) require a country of origin label. Labels for these should be visible to the consumer and near to where the foods are displayed.

What do the terms 'product of', 'produce of' and 'produced in' mean?

'Product of', 'produce of' and 'produced in' are premium claims. This means each ingredient of the food must have originated in the country and the food must have been manufactured in that country.

What do the terms 'made in' and 'manufactured in' mean?

'Made in' and 'manufactured in' can be used only if the food has been changed or processed in the country. 50% of the cost of production must have been incurred in that country.

What terms can be used if the production or produce is mixed?

Claims such as **'made in Australia from imported ingredients'** or **'packaged in Australia from local and imported ingredients'** can be used where uncertainty exists around the manufacture of the food, the 50% production costs or seasonal changes of the produce.

For more information

You should contact the Food Authority if you do not get a satisfactory response from the retailer about product beyond its 'use by' or 'best before' or misleading country of origin labelling.

You should also contact the Food Authority if you have any other questions about date-marking, country of origin or any other labelling issues.

Food Authority Contact Centre

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