

Many consumers misinterpret food date labels, yet use them with confidence

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Example of an illustrated message. Credit: *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*

Misunderstanding food date labeling is common and educational communications are needed to improve consumer understanding, according to a new study in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*.

Does it mean "spoiled—throw it out," or "might not taste as good as it could anymore?" Food date labels (e.g., "USE By August 16") can play an important role in helping consumers make informed decisions about [food](#), and ultimately prevent unsafe consumption and waste of food. Researchers surveyed 2,607 adults in the United States to assess consumer understanding of the streamlined 2-date labeling system and explore the relative effectiveness of educational messages in increasing understanding.

"Our study showed that an overwhelming majority of consumers say that they use food date labels to make decisions about food and say they know what the labels mean," said Catherine Turvey, MPH, Department of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Milken Institute School of Public Health, The George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA. "Despite confidently using date labels, many consumers misinterpreted the labels and continued to misunderstand even after reading educational messaging that explained the labels' meaning."

Less than half (46 percent) of study respondents knew that the "BEST If Used By" [label](#) specifically indicates that [food quality](#) may deteriorate after the date on the label. Less than one-quarter (24 percent) of study respondents knew that the "USE By" label means that food is not safe to eat after the date on the label.

Researchers explored if framing the messages with values like saving money or avoiding waste, would impact the effectiveness of messages at

increasing consumer understanding. None of the seven value frames tested was significantly more effective at increasing understanding than another, but all messages significantly increased consumer's general understanding of the labels.

After viewing educational messages, 37 percent of consumers still did not understand the specific meaning of the "BEST If Used By" label and 48 percent did not understand the specific meaning of the "USE By" label.

"Responses to the survey suggest that date labels are so familiar that some consumers believe they are boring, self-explanatory, or common sense despite misunderstanding the labels," said Ms. Turvey.

"Unwarranted confidence and the familiarity of date labels may make consumers less attentive to educational messaging that explains the [food industry](#)'s labeling system."

Future communication campaigns will have to capture the attention of people who think they already know what date labels mean, find the information tedious, or are satisfied with a rough understanding of labels. Educating [consumers](#) about the meaning of the labels has growing implications for food waste and food safety as the 2-date labeling system becomes more widely adopted and gains support from non-profits and government institutions.

More information: Impact of Messaging Strategy on Consumer Understanding of Food Date Labels, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2021.03.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2021.03.007)

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