

Canned Food, Shelf Life

One of the most frequently asked questions about canned food is its shelf life and "use-by" dates. The codes that are stamped on canned food are manufacturers' codes that usually designate the date the product was packaged. The codes vary from manufacturer to manufacturer and usually include coding for time and place of canning. Most manufacturers offer a toll-free number to call for questions about canned food expiration dates. For a sampling of how to read product codes, See Below.

Remember, the code stamped on the can is when it was packaged. The general rule of thumb is that canned food has a shelf life of at least two years from the date of purchase. It is recommended that all canned food be stored in moderate temperatures (75° F and below). Many canned products now have a "for best quality use by" date stamped on the top or bottom of the can. "Expiration" dates are rarely found on canned food.

Canned food has a shelf life of at least two years from the date of processing. Canned food retains its safety and nutritional value well beyond two years, but it may have some variation in quality, such as a change of color and texture. Canning is a high-heat process that renders the food commercially sterile. Food safety is not an issue in products kept on the shelf or in the pantry for long periods of time. In fact, canned food has an almost indefinite shelf life at moderate temperatures (75° F and below). Canned food as old as 100 years has been found in sunken ships and it is still microbiologically safe! We don't recommend keeping canned food for 100 years, but if the can is intact, not dented or bulging, it is edible.

In a well-run supermarket, foods on the shelf will be rotated on a regular basis, so there is continuous turnover. Each canned food manufacturer has a unique coding system. Some manufacturers list day, month and year of production, while other companies reference only the year. These codes are usually imprinted on the top or bottom of the can. Other numbers may appear and reference the specific plant manufacturing or product information and are not useful to consumers. Below is a sampling of how some manufacturers code their products so consumers know when the product was packaged. If you have specific questions about a company's product, contact a customer service representative at the phone number listed.

Note: For month coding, if a number is used, numbers 1 through 9 represent January through September, and letters O for October, N for November and D for December. If letters are used, A=Jan. and L=Dec., unless otherwise noted.

Note: For year coding, 8=1998; 9=1999; 0=2000; 1=2001; 2=2002, etc.

Bush Brothers & Company

(voice: 865/509-2361)

Four digits

Position 1: Month

Position 2 and 3: Day

Position 4: Year

Example: 2061 (February 6, 2001)

Chiquita Processed Foods

(voice: 800/872-1110)

Ten digits (only 6-8 are pertinent to consumers)

Position 6: Year (A=1999, B=2000, C=2001, etc.)

Position 7 and 8: Julian Date

Example: A195 (July 14, 1999- July 14 is the 195th day of the year)

Del Monte Foods (voice:

800/543-3090)

First line, four digits

Position 1: Year

Position 2, 3 and 4: Julian Date

Example: 9045 (February 14, 1999)

Faribault Foods

Consumers can send inquiries and product coding numbers via an online contact form, and a company representative will help them understand the coding.

www.faribaultfoods.com

Furman Foods (voice: 877/877-6032)

Second line, first four digits

Position 1: Year

Position 2, 3 and 4: Julian Date

Example: 9045 (February 14, 1999)

Hirzel Canning (voice: 800/837-1631)

First line, four digits

Position 1: Year

Position 2, 3 and 4: Julian Date

Example: 0195 (July 14, 2000- July 14th is the 195th day of the year)

Hormel Foods Corporation

(voice: 800/523-4635)

Five digits on the top line

Position 1-4: Information about plant and manufacturing

Position 5: Year

Example: XXXX0 (2000)

Lakeside Foods (voice: 920/684-3356)

Second line, second through fifth digits

Position 2: Month (Jan.=1,

Sept.=9, Oct.=A, Nov.=B,

Dec.=C)

Position 3 and 4: Date

Position 5: Year

Example: 4A198 (October 19, 1998)

Maple Leaf Consumer Foods

(voice: 800/268-3708)

Top of can, grouping of last four digits

Position 1: Year

Position 2,3, and 4: Julian Date

Example: 9130 (May 9, 1999)

Mid-Atlantic Foods (voice:

410/957-4100)

Second through fourth digits

Position 2: Month (letter)

Position 3: Date (A=1, Z=26)

Position 4: Year

Example: MDE0 (April 5, 2000)

Pillsbury/Green Giant and

Progresso (voice: 800/998-9996)

Five digits

Position 1: Month (letter)

Position 2: Year

Position 3: Plant information

Position 4 and 5: Date

Example: G8A08 (July 8, 1998)

Seneca Foods (voice: 315/926-6710)

Two digits on the first line

Position 1: Month (letter)

Position 2: Year

Example: L1 (December 2001)

Stagg Chili (voice: 800/611-9778)

Second through sixth digits

Position 2 and 3: Month

Position 4 and 5: Day

Position 6: Year

Example: S02050 (February 5, 2000)

"Information provided by the Canned Food Alliance. For hundreds of nutritious, delicious, easy recipes that use canned food, visit www.mealtime.org."