

Five Things to Know: How Confusing Food Date Labels Are Hitting Consumers' Wallets



Confusion over food date labels remains one of the most persistent, yet solvable, drivers of household food waste in the United States. At a time when grocery prices remain high and households are actively trying to save money, understanding how consumers use (and struggle with) date labels offers a critical opportunity to ensure food that is still edible—despite passing a mostly arbitrary date—is consumed rather than sent to the trash. Drawing from insights from a recent YouGov survey, here are five things to know about food date labels:

1. Nearly all consumers report using date labels when making decisions about food.

Date labels are deeply embedded in consumer decision-making, with 96% of respondents reporting that they use date labels, including “sell by,” “use by,” and/or “best by” dates to some extent.

2. Consumers apply date labels differently depending on the food and (mis)interpret them in several ways.

Thirty-one percent of respondents report strictly following date labels for all foods, while a third say they only follow date labels for perceived high-risk items like meat, dairy, and eggs, where spoilage and food borne illnesses are more of a concern. Importantly, “following” a date label does not necessarily mean discarding food; rather it suggests that consumers are using the printed date as a primary signal when navigating food decisions and often—as we know from past research—misinterpreting them.

3. Many households already use sensory checks, but date labels still have influence.

Consumers report relying on sensory cues alongside date labels when assessing whether food is still usable. Eighty-six percent say they smell food, 76% look at it, and 35% taste a small amount when determining whether food is safe to eat.

4. Consumers report trying to waste less food in response to higher grocery prices.

In response to current food prices, 77% of consumers who reported spending more on groceries compared to last year say they are more frequently checking and cooking what needs using up in their kitchen, and 55% of all respondents report throwing away less food than they did a year ago.

5. Congress has the opportunity to help consumers save money and reduce waste by standardizing and clarifying date labels.

Households are already trying to waste less food and manage costs, but inconsistent and unclear date labels can undermine those efforts. The Food Date Labeling Act can help solve this problem by creating a standardized, easy-to-understand date label scheme.

Learn more about the Food Date Labeling Act and how you can support it at:

<https://zerofoodwastecoalition.org/news/widespread-industry-support-for-the-food-date-labeling-act-of-2025/>

This information comes from a January 2026 nationally representative survey of 1,000 U.S. consumers conducted by ReFED and YouGov to better understand food waste behaviors and decision-making in the home.