

Best Before AND Beyond

Overcoming confusion over food date labels
October 2025





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Executive summary

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Confusion about what date labels do—and *don't*—mean is recognised as a major contributor to food waste and a barrier to food donation around the world.

Feeding Hong Kong set out to understand the connection between date labels, food waste and food donation here in Hong Kong. We collaborated with YouGov and Hong Kong University on two separate consumer surveys and introduced a new section on date labels in our Annual Charity Survey.

The results confirm that mistaken beliefs about 'Best Before' and 'Use By' dates are a significant driver of household food waste and a barrier to surplus food redistribution. They also highlight that confusion around date labels is a source of food safety concern but – on an encouraging note – that there is an appetite for positive action.

These findings support the importance of consumer education to address date label confusion. Greater clarity will help reduce food waste and save money for individual households, increase food security for vulnerable people, and support a **stronger, more resilient food system in Hong Kong**.



Background

Our research objective

This project aims to examine how date label confusion often leads to discarding perfectly safe, edible food.

As a foodbank, this supports our goal to increase the redistribution of surplus food, as well as reduce overall waste to landfill through changes in industry and household behaviour.



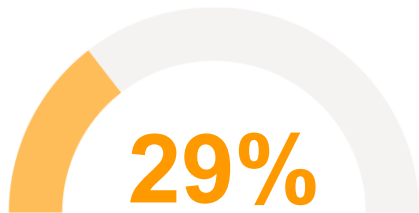
Feeding Hong Kong is a charity on a mission to save quality food from going to landfills while delivering food security in Hong Kong.

We do this by collecting surplus stock from food companies, sorting and storing it, then redistributing it to charities who feed vulnerable communities.

We get people involved as volunteers and educate about food waste, food security and food banking.

We are Hong Kong's sole accredited member of the Global FoodBanking Network, an international organisation dedicated to creating and strengthening food banks.

3,191 tonnes of food is sent to landfills everyday



of solid waste in Hong Kong is food



That is nearly 213 double decker buses per day



Consumers contribute 63% of food waste

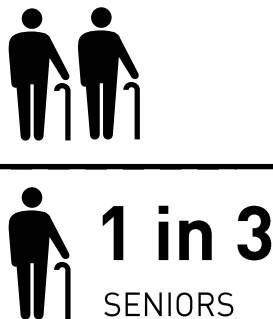
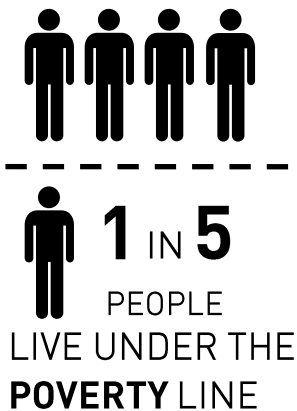
Hong Kong's food waste problem is not one that can be solved by any one player – policy-makers, industry and consumers all have a role to play. However, the overwhelming majority of food waste comes from households. This means that everyday choices by individuals matter and small changes to how we shop, store food, cook and treat leftovers can truly make a difference.

Food wanted

1.39 million people live in poverty

POVERTY LINE IS
HK\$5,000

PER MONTH FOR
A SINGLE
PERSON



HONG KONG'S
INCOME
INEQUALITY
IS ONE OF THE
HIGHEST AMONG
DEVELOPED
ECONOMIES



At the same time that good food is being wasted, many households in Hong Kong struggle to afford enough quality, nutritious food. Redirecting quality, surplus food to feed people in need, can reduce the negative environmental impact of food waste and maximise the positive social impact of shared food.

Food date labels

In Hong Kong, the [Food and Drugs Regulations](#) require pre-packaged foods to have one of two labels: either 'Best Before' or 'Use By'. There is no definitive list of which foods should carry a particular type of date mark. Food companies are the ones who understand the properties of their products best and have the responsibility to set the appropriate date mark for consumers to make informed food choices.

	'Best Before' date	'Use By' or 'Expiry' date
Definition	Indicates the date until the product is expected to maintain optimal quality (taste, texture, etc.)	Marks the last date a product should be consumed for safety reasons
Safety	Generally safe to consume after this date, though quality may decline	Consuming after this date may pose health risks

Our research set out to quantify consumer understanding and behaviour related to these date labels.



Research methodology



YouGov Food Waste Omnibus

Method: Online poll

Coverage: Hong Kong, sample size = 1,010

Target group: Representative cross section of the Hong Kong population

Languages: English and Chinese

Data Collection Period: August 2025



Feeding Hong Kong Annual Charity Survey

Method: Online survey

Coverage: Hong Kong, sample size = 153 frontline charities

Target group: NGO partners of Feeding Hong Kong providing direct community food assistance

Languages: English and Chinese

Data Collection Period: August-September 2024



香港大學

THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Hong Kong University Post Graduate Survey 'Analysing consumer understanding of 'Best Before' and 'Use By' labels and their relationship to food waste in Hong Kong'

Method: Online survey and selected stakeholder interviews

Coverage: Hong Kong, sample size = 335

Target group: Representative cross section of the Hong Kong population

Languages: English and Chinese

Data Collection Period: March-April 2025



At a glance

DATE LABEL CONFUSION IS A MAJOR CAUSE FOR CONCERN

Confusion around date labelling is leading to unnecessary food waste AND food safety risk in Hong Kong

25%

of consumers **misunderstand** the meaning of 'Best Before' dates

17%

immediately **throw away** food that is beyond its 'Best Before' date

32%

are not aware that food beyond its 'Use By' date is **unsafe** to consume

GOOD FOOD IS BEING UNECESSARILY THROWN AWAY

**Nutritious foods with limited food safety risks are
wasted the most**

Top 3

**foods most regularly thrown away once
reaching their 'Best Before' date are **fruit &
veg, milk and bread****

24%

**of consumers name packaged staples e.g.
rice, pasta and noodles as one of the top
three foods they most commonly throw away**

DATE LABEL CONFUSION MAY LIMIT SURPLUS FOOD REDISTRIBUTION

Misunderstanding of date labels prevent charities from redistributing more high quality, surplus food through their food programmes

12%

of Feeding Hong Kong charity partners believe that food is **no longer safe** to eat after its 'Best Before' date

18%

immediately **discard** food that is beyond its 'Best Before' date

74%

are **not fully confident** in their understanding of date labels

CONSUMERS EXPRESS AN APPETITE FOR POSITIVE ACTION

Despite the confusion over date labels, consumers are motivated to reduce food waste

67% will **freeze** leftovers or surplus food to avoid waste

35% will compost or **recycle** food waste

64% will meal **plan** and use shopping lists to help prevent food waste

15% will **donate** surplus food to charities



Key findings

BEST BEFORE DATE CONFUSION

25% of consumers consider food that is beyond its 'Best Before' date is **unsafe** to consume, or are unsure, indicating that we are **unnecessarily throwing away good food**.

'Best Before' date
understanding



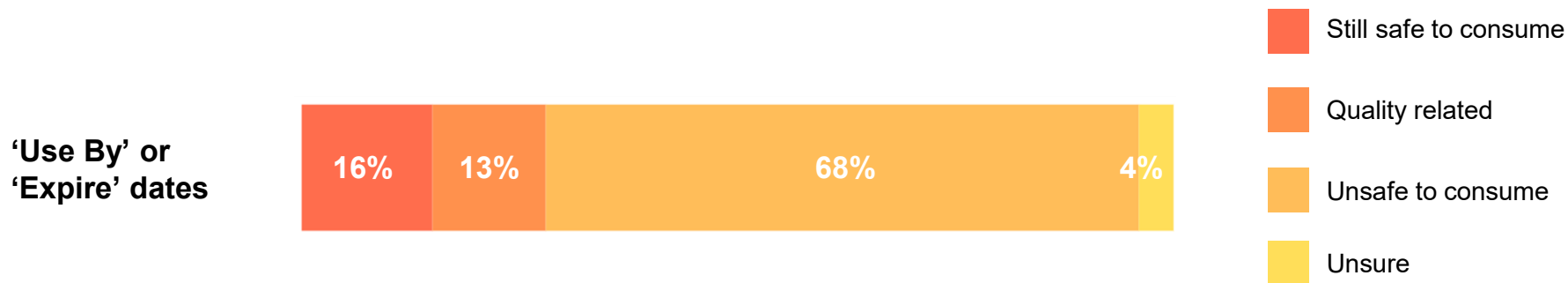
- Still safe to consume
- Quality related
- Unsafe to consume
- Unsure

Clarifying that a best before date indicates quality NOT safety can support food waste reduction.

USE BY OR EXPIRY DATE MISUNDERSTANDING

16% of consumers consider food that is beyond its 'Use By' or 'Expiry' dates mean the product is still safe to consume. This is not true.

In fact, **32% of consumers** do not fully understand that 'Use By' or 'Expiry' dates mean the product is **unsafe to consume**, indicating there is a lot of confusion that could affect consumer safety.



Educating consumers about the safety implications of a 'Use By' or 'Expiry' dates will support stronger food safety practices.

WHAT HAPPENS TO FOOD BEYOND ITS BEST BEFORE DATE

While some consumers are throwing away food unnecessarily, almost **83%** are using food beyond its 'Best Before' date, many using common sense to check whether it is still good to eat.

17%

of Hong Kong consumers immediately throw away food that has passed its 'Best Before' date

41%

will still use the food as long as it smells and looks OK, or will make a judgement based on the food type or how long past the date

49%

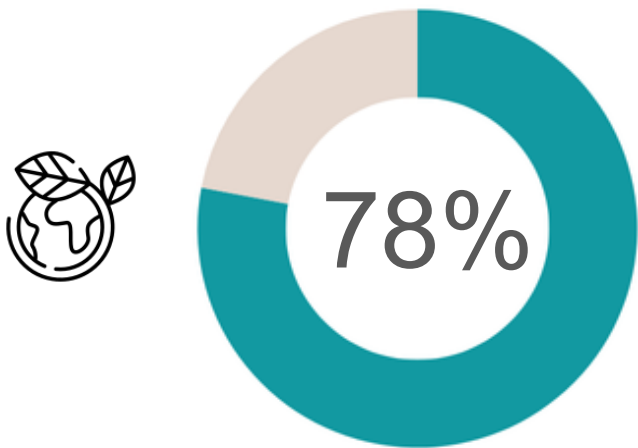
will still use depending on how long it has passed the date

Encouraging consumers to use their judgement to see if food smells and looks OK, alongside date labels, will help avoid the unnecessary disposal of safe, nutritious food.

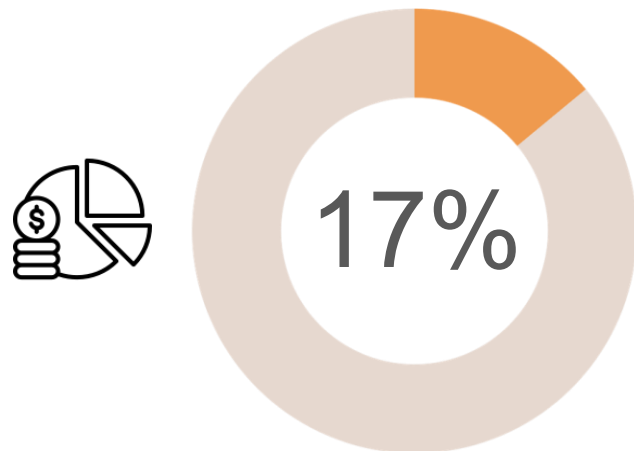
CONSUMER MOTIVATION

We asked those who expressed that they would use food beyond its 'Best Before' date about their motivation.

To avoid food waste



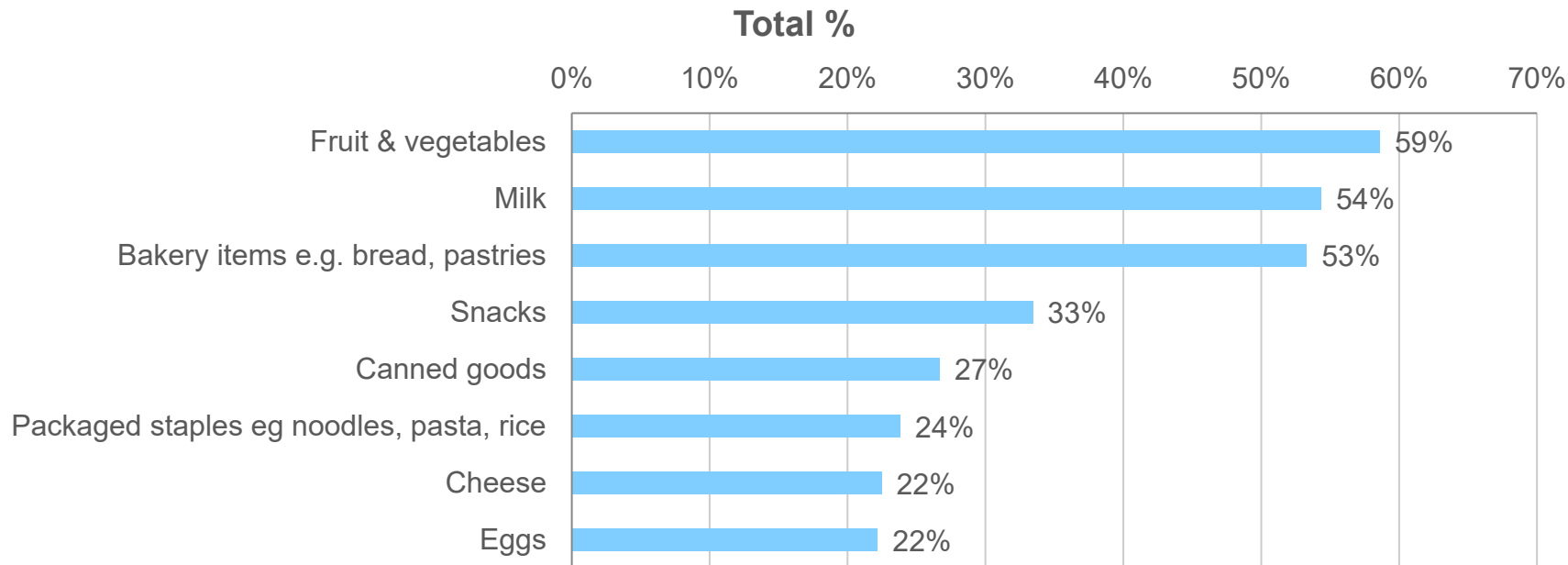
To save money



The fight against food waste is a powerful catalyst for change for many consumers but saving money is also a key driver for some presenting an opportunity for food companies.

FOODS WASTED BECAUSE OF DATE LABELS

More than half of consumers site fruit and vegetables, milk and bakery items as the top 3 items they most commonly throw away once they are beyond their 'Best Before' date.



STORE CUPBOARD STAPLES COULD BE SAVED

Key staple packaged ingredients, such as rice, noodles, pasta and tinned goods are commonly good for months or even years beyond their 'Best Before' date. However:

27%

of Hong Kong consumers list **canned goods** within the top three food types most often thrown out



24%

state **packaged staples e.g. rice, pasta and noodles** are within the top three food types most thrown away



By educating about the importance of proper food storage, we can empower consumers to prolong the lifespan of groceries.

FRESH, NUTRITIOUS FOODS ARE WASTED MOST

Fresh foods, such as fruit, veg, milk and baked goods can still be good to eat after their 'Best Before' date. However, these foods are the top one items being thrown away most frequently.



By focusing our efforts on better managing commonly wasted fresh foods, we can help consumers make the most of the groceries they buy.

MORE VALUABLE GOOD FOOD FOR THOSE IN NEED

Understanding of 'Best Before' dates means that donated surplus food will have greater potential and perceived value for vulnerable communities. However:

12%

of NGOs surveyed, believed that food is no longer safe to eat after its 'Best Before' date

18%

Shared that they discard food that is beyond its 'Best Before' date

56%

of NGOs felt 'somewhat confident' in their understanding of 'Best Before' dates, with **18%** not very confident at all

FHK's annual charity survey

Each year, we survey our charity network to learn more about their needs, how our food helps them and what else we can do to support them.

In 2024, we introduced a new section to our survey to better understand how our partners perceived and handled donations close to their date labels.

By scaling consumer education about date labels, all households – regardless of income - will have a greater understanding of which foods are safe to eat, and will be empowered to take actions which both reduce waste and save money.

LABELS MATTER

Our YouGov consumer poll is backed up by a longer survey conducted by **Hong Kong University** post graduate students. This research dived deeper into attitudes and behaviours around date labels, and included supplementary interviews with key stakeholders.

Survey consistent with poll findings

One in five respondents did not accurately understand the meaning of a 'Best Before' date, and **11%** would immediately throw that food away

In fact, **one third** are throwing away food beyond its '**Best Before**' date **once a week or more**

Over **17%** did not fully understand that food beyond its '**Use By**' date is **NOT SAFE** to consume, with over **50%** still eating the product

If food has passed its 'Best Before' date, **68%** of respondents will check the product's **appearance, smell and texture** before deciding whether to eat it

Date label education is key

60% of consumers have received education or information about food date labels in the past

63% shared that food date labels will influence meal choices for the week, prioritising using food that is nearing 'Use By', 'Expiry' or 'Best Before' first, in order to avoid food waste

85% will store purchased food properly helping to maintain the lifespan

50% agree that standardising data labels on food would help to reduce food waste.

PREVENTING FOOD WASTE

There are multiple easy ways of preventing food waste, which consumers are already putting into practice.

67%

will freeze leftovers or surplus food to avoid food waste



64%

will meal plan and use shopping lists to help prevent food waste



35%

will compost or recycle food waste



15%

will donate surplus food to charities



Freezing food provides a powerful opportunity to extend the life of food. However, 35% of FHK charity partners do not have freezers and many of the vulnerable families they serve may have limited or no freezer storage



Global insights

Hong Kong's food supply

Hong Kong's food industry is characterised by a significant reliance on imports. This diverse sourcing means that the city's importers encounter a wide array of date labelling practices. However, a dual date label system - which includes a quality date and a safety date – emerges as a common trend.

Centre for Food Safety, The Government of the HKSAR, [REF](#)

In Hong Kong, the [Food and Drugs Regulations](#) require pre-packaged foods to have one of two labels, either 'Best Before', or 'Use By' (both with accompanying storage instructions).

Beyond the '**Best Before**' date, the food may **still be acceptable** to eat though it may have lost some of its quality e.g. a loaf of bread may still be safe to eat but may have become dry and leathery.

After the '**Use By**' date, the food may be **unsafe to eat** even if it looks and smells fine.



Example from New Zealand

Where our food comes from and what their labels say

State Administration for Market Regulation, China, REF



Announced in 2025, new date labelling regulations will be enforced from 2027, requiring 'date of manufacture and shelf life expiration date, clearly stating the end of shelf life period in order of year, month and day. This shelf-life date should be the last possible **'Consumption Date'**.

While the traditional **'Best Before'** date signifies when a product remains at peak quality, the **'Consumption Date'** indicates the point beyond which the product may no longer be safe for consumption.

Currently, the **'Consumption Date'** is a length of time, rather than a fixed date.

Food Standards, Australia, New Zealand, REF



Most foods have a **'Best Before'** date. You can still eat foods for a while after the **'Best Before'** date as they should be safe but they may have lost some quality. Foods that must be eaten before a certain time for health or safety reasons should be marked with a **'Use By'** date.

Food & Drug Administration, USA, REF



The FDA recommends using the **'Best if Used By'** date to indicate optimal quality and taste, not safety, and states that food past this date is often still safe to eat, though quality may have declined.

Insights from some other food suppliers to Hong Kong

Consumer Affairs Agency, Japan, [REF](#)



The 'Best Before' date is the date until which all the expected quality of the product is deemed sufficiently likely to be preserved if stored according to the specified storage method. The quality may be preserved even if the date has elapsed. The 'Use By' date is the date until which the product is deemed free from the risk of being unsafe due to rot, spoilage, or other quality deterioration if stored according to the specified storage method.

Food Standards Agency, United Kingdom [REF](#)



'Best Before' dates relate to food quality, not safety, meaning the food is still safe to eat after the date but may not be at its best in terms of flavour or texture. Consumers should follow storage instructions, as a 'Best Before' date is only valid if the product is stored correctly.

The Food & Drug Administration of Thailand, [REF](#)



'Best Before' date indicates the end period during which the food is still of good quality under the storage conditions specified on the label. After the specified date, the quality of the food may change. 'Expiration' date indicates the end of the food quality under the storage conditions specified on the label.

Hong Kong imports over 90% of its food supply

International NGOs support the need for standardised date labels and consumer education

WRAP. Clarify labelling to differentiate quality and safety dates

WRAP supports clearer labelling through:

- [Guidance](#) to food business operators on food-labelling, with Food Standards Agency and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- [Surveys](#) to understand how retailers are adopting labelling guidelines to reduce household waste
- Developing [guidelines](#) for NGOs regarding food surplus distribution.

Waste & Resources Action Plan (WRAP) is a global environmental action NGO, protecting our planet by changing the way things are produced, consumed and disposed



Global FoodBanking Network (GFN). Promoting three best practices

GFN partnered with the Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic to publish an issue brief '[Promoting Food Donation: Date Labeling Law and Policy](#)' which shares three best practices:

- Standardise to a dual date labelling, clearly distinguishing between quality-based and safety-based date label
- Expressly permit the sale and donation of food past its quality-based date label
- Launch widespread consumer education campaigns about the meaning of date labels in partnership with the private sector.

Global FoodBanking Network supports community-led solutions to alleviate hunger in nearly 50 countries.



ReFED. Standard, streamline and simplify to avoid confusion & food waste

[ReFED](#) supports the Zero Food Waste Coalition; a range of groups who are advocating for just two standardized date labels:

- '**BEST if used by**' as a measure of quality
- '**USE By**' to indicate an increased risk in consuming food

The USDA & FDA are proposing The Food Date Labelling Act to standardize food date labels.

ReFED is a US-based NGO working to end food loss and waste.





Recommendations

The problem

Confusion around date labelling is leading to unnecessary food waste and risk of food safety in Hong Kong

Misunderstanding is also limiting the amount of quality, surplus food that can be redistributed through charity food programmes

The solution

EDUCATE, EMPOWER, CHANGE

Consumer education that clarifies what date labels mean would not only help individuals reduce food waste and save money, but maximise the power of surplus food to increase food security. This change would support a stronger, more resilient food system in Hong Kong.

KEY MESSAGE: Most food beyond its 'Best Before' date is still perfectly safe to eat. Does it look, smell and taste OK? Use your senses to reduce food waste and save money.

Secondary: If food is past its 'Use By' date this relates to safety and should not be consumed.

Share 'Best Before & Beyond' report findings in order to reinforce key messages

- Media and influencer campaign, launching World Food Day, October 16, 2025
- Feeding Hong Kong publicity channels; website, newsletters, social media
- MTR poster campaign featured on Community message boards across 88 stations (October 19-25, 2025)



KEY MESSAGE: It is easy to prolong the life of perfectly good food that is close to, or beyond its 'Best Before' date. Make good food last longer, reduce food waste and save money.

General tips

- **First to expire, first out - FEFO!** Use up food with the shortest lifespan first.
- **The freezer is your friend.** The life of most foods can be prolonged with freezing. Watch out for labels which state that a product has been previously frozen (usually meat/fish). These should not be refrozen.
- **Storage matters.** Follow pack instructions to prolong food life, especially important in Hong Kong's humid environment.
- **Bag it.** Use airtight bags or containers and remove as much air as possible before sealing to prevent spoilage and freezer burn.
- **Vacuum sealing.** If you have a vacuum sealer, use it to store meat, fish and leftovers. By removing as much air as possible food will stay fresher for longer.
- **Recycle!** When you do need to throw away food, separate it from your other waste and dispose of it responsibly. The government is expanding the city's recycling network and the number of residential smart recycling bins and food waste collection facilities is increasing.

There are so many clever tricks and ideas to keep your food, better for longer. Try some of these.

Fresh fruit and vegetables

- Most veg can be par-boiled (which helps to retain nutrients) and frozen for later use
- Cook at best veg in soups & stir fries
- Use up fruit by in smoothies and cakes
- Wrap leafy greens in a paper towel before placing in a plastic bag to help absorb moisture and to keep crisper for longer

Milk & Cheese

- Did you know milk and cheese can be frozen?
- Use up surplus milk in soups and sauces
- Grate cheese before freezing and take out what is needed

Bread

- Freeze bread slices to make toast later
- Turn bread into breadcrumbs and freeze

Eggs

- Egg float test; if the egg sinks in a bowl of cold water it is still good to eat, even if standing on one end. If it floats to the surface, it should be discarded

Rice, pasta, noodles & canned foods

- These can commonly be good for months beyond their 'Best Before' date

FoodKeeper

- Want to understand more about how long you can store food for? Search by food category on the [FoodKeeper website](#)



Best Before AND Beyond

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