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FEATURE ARTICLE

Fresh or Foul? What Consumers Need to Know About Egg ‘Laid On’ Dates

Eggs are a daily essential in many homes, a quick breakfast option, a key ingredient in baking, and an affordable source of protein for families. However, recent market surveillance has uncovered troubling practices in relation to the expiry dates on egg trays.

During its market surveillances in supermarkets along the Suva-Nausori corridor, the Consumer Council of Fiji has identified three serious issues. In one supermarket, additional “laid on” date stickers had been placed directly over previous ones, effectively replacing the original date. In other supermarkets, eggs were found on sale even though they had already passed their expiry dates. Meanwhile, for one brand marketed as “free range,” the laid-on date was completely missing from the trays.

Taken together, these findings raise significant concerns about transparency, quality control and consumer protection. They also underscore the importance of shoppers understanding how to read and interpret egg labelling before making a purchase.

This feature explains what “laid on” dates really mean, how to read them correctly, and why consumers should be cautious.

What Does “Laid On” Mean?

Unlike some foods that carry a “best before” or “use by” date, egg trays are marked with a “laid on” date. This is the date the egg was actually laid. It is not the expiry date. Instead, it is the starting point from which you calculate how fresh the egg would be.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), in general, eggs remain fresh for about 21 to 28 days after the laid-on date, if they are stored properly in a refrigerator. As time passes, the quality of the egg declines. The white becomes thinner, the yolk flattens, and the risk of spoilage increases.

If a new “laid on” date is placed over the original one, it gives the false impression that the eggs are newer than they really are. This can mislead consumers into buying eggs that are already near the end of their safe consumption period.

Here is a helpful set of tips that consumers can use to assess the freshness of eggs from the laid-on date:

Head Office

Level 5 Vanua House
Victoria Parade GPO, Suva
Phone: 3300792/3310183
CEO: 3305864
Fax: 3300115
Email: complaints@consumersfiji.org

Lautoka/West

Suite 4 Popular Building
Vidilo Street
P.O. Box 5396, Lautoka
Phone: 6664987
Email: consumerlkt@connect.com.fj

Labasa/North

Shop 2, Mudaliar Investment
Sangam Avenue Street
P.O. Box 64, Labasa
Phone: 8812559
Email: colbs@connect.com.fj



- 1. Look for the “laid on” date:** This tells you exactly when the eggs were laid. The closer the date is to the day you are buying them, the fresher the eggs should be.
- 2. Count the days:** If the laid-on date is more than three weeks old, the eggs are already approaching the end of their recommended shelf life.
- 3. Check for tampering:** Look carefully at the date sticker. If it appears to be layered, peeling, or placed over another label, that is a red flag. Any sign of tampering should be reported to store management or the relevant authorities such as the Consumer Council.

Eggs Sold Past Their Expiry Date

In other supermarkets, eggs were found still on display and available for sale even though they had exceeded the recommended consumption period. While these egg trays did not carry a specific expiry or “best before” date, the typical best practice is that the eggs should be consumed within 21 days of laying, a guideline that aligns with widely accepted international best practices for freshness and safety.

The Councils surveillance uncovered trays being sold beyond this 21-day window. Retailers are responsible for proper stock rotation and for ensuring that products are removed from sale once they exceed their stated consumption period. Failure to do so not only undermine consumer confidence and poses food safety risks, it may also be a breach of the *Food Safety Act*.

Signs an Egg May Not Be Fresh

Even when the egg tray looks fine, it is still possible to end up with spoiled eggs. Here are a few simple checks you can do at home, as established global best practices according to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA):

The smell test: A rotten egg has a strong, unpleasant sulphur smell. If you notice this when cracking the egg, throw it away immediately.

Visual check: A fresh egg has a firm yolk and thick white. If the yolk breaks easily or the white is very runny, the egg is old.

Additional Risk of Roadside Egg Sales

Another concern uncovered during surveillance is the sale of eggs by roadside vendors. In some cases, eggs that are close to or past their recommended shelf life are sold in these informal settings.

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Victoria Parade GPO, Suva
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CEO: 3305864
Fax: 3300115
Email: complaints@consumersfiji.org

Lautoka/West

Suite 4 Popular Building
Vidilo Street
P.O. Box 5396, Lautoka
Phone: 6664987
Email: consumerlkt@connect.com.fj

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P.O. Box 64, Labasa
Phone: 8812559
Email: colbs@connect.com.fj



Consumers should be aware that roadside stalls often operate outside the formal retail system, where enforcement of food safety standards is significantly weaker. As a result, eggs sold at these locations frequently do not carry laid-on dates or clear labelling, making it difficult for buyers to determine their freshness.

Proper storage is equally important. Eggs should be kept in a cool, dry place, preferably refrigerated, to preserve their quality and slow deterioration. Yet, eggs sold by roadside vendors are commonly exposed to harsh weather conditions, including prolonged heat, direct sunlight, and even rain. Such exposure can accelerate spoilage.

The Consumer Council has received feedback from shoppers who purchased trays of eggs at discounted roadside prices, only to discover at home that several were rotten. This not only results in wasted money but also creates potential health risks if spoiled eggs are unknowingly consumed.

As a general rule, consumers should:

- Avoid buying eggs from roadside vendors, especially if they are not properly labelled.
- Purchase eggs from reputable supermarkets or stores where labelling of 'laid on' dates can be enforced.
- Check the laid-on date before buying, and carry out due diligence.

Why Proper Labelling Matters

Food labelling is not just a technical requirement; it is a matter of consumer safety and trust. When date labels are tampered with, it undermines confidence in the product and in the retailer selling it.

Eggs are particularly sensitive because they are perishable and can carry harmful bacteria if not handled properly. As has been shown through research by the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) and evidenced by reputable research sites such as FoodSafety.org and the MayoClinic, consuming spoiled eggs can lead to foodborne illness, especially for young children, pregnant women, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems.

Accurate labelling ensures that consumers can make informed choices about what they are buying and feeding their families.

What to Do if You Suspect Tampering

Head Office

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CEO: 3305864
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Vidilo Street
P.O. Box 5396, Lautoka
Phone: 6664987
Email: consumerlwk@connect.com.fj

Labasa/North

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Sangam Avenue Street
P.O. Box 64, Labasa
Phone: 8812559
Email: colbs@connect.com.fj



@CCoFiji



Consumer Council of Fiji



www.consumersfiji.org



Mobile App

If you notice eggs with suspicious labels or discover rotten eggs soon after purchase:

1. Keep the tray and receipt if possible.
2. Report the issue to the store where you bought the eggs.
3. Contact the Consumer Council to lodge a complaint. You can also leave an anonymous tip-off.

Consumer complaints play a crucial role in identifying unsafe practices and holding suppliers accountable.

A Shared Responsibility

Retailers and suppliers have a duty to ensure that eggs are correctly labelled and removed from shelves when expired. However, consumers also play an important role. Through active vigilance, checking dates carefully, and reporting irregularities, shoppers can help maintain higher standards in the marketplace.

Eggs may seem like a simple, everyday product. However, the recent findings show how easily trust can be compromised. A small sticker can make a big difference, hence knowing what to look for ensures that what ends up on your plate is fresh, safe and truly worth the price you pay.

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