



Earth911<sup>®</sup>  
More Ideas, Less Waste

[How to Recycle](#)

[Where to Recycle](#)

[How & Buy](#)   [How To Recycle](#)

Reading time: 3 mins

# Packaging Myths: Don't Believe Everything on Product Labels



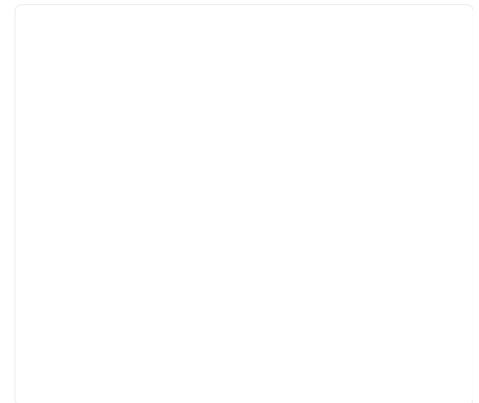
By [Gemma Alexander](#)

© MAY 31, 2021   [labels, product packaging](#)



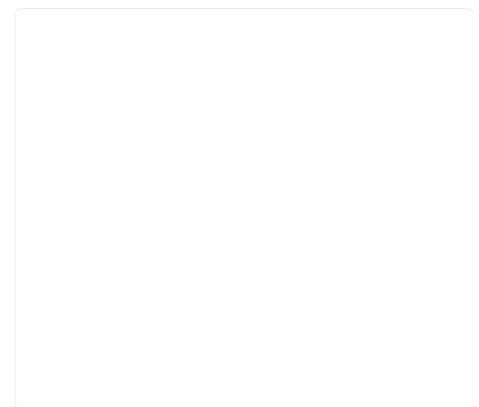
Recycling is the most basic environmental action, but it's not as simple as you think. We're still much better at recycling packaging than products, but packaging is all wrapped up in marketing, and that can generate a lot of confusion. That's a problem because [55% of consumers](#) rely on packaging labels to determine recyclability. Here are five myths about labels you can find on product packaging.

The expiration date on the package is the day a



Never miss an update!

[JOIN OUR LIST](#)



## product will go bad.

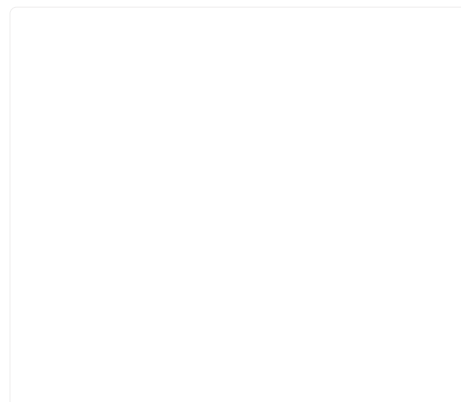
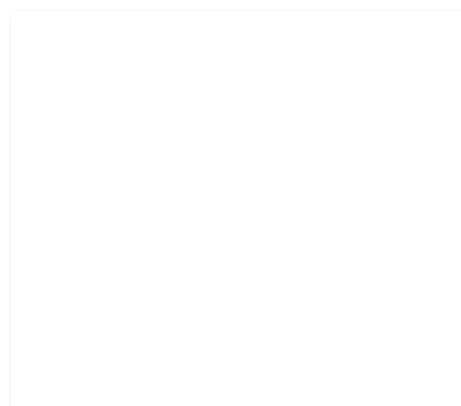
Food waste is a [huge global problem](#), and the expiration or sell-by dates on food packaging contribute a lot to it. If you throw food away as soon as the date on the package comes around, you are throwing away a lot of perfectly edible food. Except for [infant formula](#), those dates are not regulated. And unless it's [deli meat](#) or soft cheese, the date probably has nothing to do with [food safety](#) (although flavor may be slightly affected). In 2019, [a bill was introduced](#) to Congress that would have required standardized labeling with one quality date indicator and one safety date indicator. But that's as far as it went. So for now, your own best judgment is still the best guide for [keeping food fresh](#) and deciding when to toss it.

## You can trust sustainability claims on packaging.

We rely on packaging to help us [shop our values](#), but it's not always a trustworthy source. Only a few packaging claims are regulated – "[made in the USA](#)" is one, and so is "[nontoxic](#)" (but only for certain product categories). There are numerous certification systems, each with different standards; some, like "[USDA Organic](#)," are regulated, some are third-party verified, and some of them don't mean much. Most labels are simply marketing terms. When you see nontoxic (except for the specifically regulated product categories), natural, sustainable, and other generic terms on a package, it is almost always a form of [greenwashing](#).

## If a package doesn't include the recycling symbol, it isn't recyclable.

A [survey](#) by the Carton Council evaluated consumer ideas about packaging. They found that 74% of consumers would assume you can't recycle any package without a recycling symbol. We are far more accustomed to [spotting greenwashing](#), but sometimes companies don't advertise their eco-friendly behaviors. It's [risky](#) for companies to inaccurately claim recyclability, and with the recycling industry in turmoil in recent years, for some companies, leaving the label off may seem safer. Because the environmental movement has unfortunate associations with



sacrifice, [poor aesthetics](#), and even “[unmanliness](#),” some companies may fear that any environmental claims will interfere with a brand image emphasizing luxury, high [quality](#), or [masculinity](#).



Just because there is a plastic recycling code on a container, don't assume you can recycle it – check with your local recycling service. Image: [Z22](#), [CC BY-SA 3.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

## You can always recycle packages marked with the recycling symbol.

The [universal recycling symbol](#) tells you a product or package is recyclable or was made with recycled content. There should be text somewhere on the package to tell you which of these conditions is true, but there is no law about it. Even if it's clear that the symbol is there to indicate that a package is recyclable, it doesn't mean that your local utility will accept it for recycling. Many materials that are technically recyclable are [not profitable](#) on the recyclable commodities market. And every community's recycling program is different. Some cities require their recyclers to accept unprofitable materials, not all of them do. You have to familiarize yourself with your local utility's recycling program.

Pay particular [attention to plastic](#). Even though plastic is less often recyclable than other materials, all plastic packages bear the recycling symbol. That's because of the numbers inside the chasing arrows. Those are [resin identification codes](#) (RICs) – numbers that indicate the type of plastic from which the item is made. Recyclers need these codes to determine whether and how to recycle a plastic item. Most states require them on all plastics regardless of recyclability.

If your local program recycles plastic at all, they probably only take [plastic #1 and #2](#).

## Recycling labels are standardized.

Product labeling is a free-for-all, and you can't trust the universal recycling symbol. Then it should be no surprise that recycling labels are not standardized. Aside from plastic, it's pretty hard to know what a recycling symbol (or its absence) means. We really need better labeling. Enter the [How2Recycle](#) label system. [GreenBlue](#) developed the How2Recycle labeling system to communicate complete, consistent information consumers could use to properly recycle packaging. They encourage companies to participate by helping them make their packages more recyclable.

[How2Recycle labels](#) provide a lot of information in a standard format. They include information on preparing a package for effective recycling; how widely recycling is available for the type of package; which category of material the package belongs to; and which part of the package the symbol refers to.

---

advertising

---



Reading time: [3 mins](#)

### [Is Soda Pop Sustainable?](#)



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

---

#### Related Post

[Food & Beverage](#)   [How & Buy](#)

### [Is Soda Pop Sustainable?](#)