

Batch Codes

It is a legal requirement for all food to be traceable to batches and this can be undertaken by use of a batch code on food labels, or use of a 'best before' or use by date on products, which will depend on the type of food. Marked codes can help you trace a problem if you have a complaint or need to recall a product from sale and help you to comply with the law.

What the law says

'Food Business Operators (FBOs) are responsible for the safety of the food which they produce, distribute, store or sell. In particular FBOs must 1. *not place unsafe food on the market*, 2. *comply with food law in the production, distribution, storage and sale of food*, 3. *be able to trace the suppliers of their food and the business customers to whom they have supplied the food (i.e. one step back and one step forward)* and 4. *remove unsafe food from the market should a food safety incident arise.*'

FBOs should therefore have adequate traceability and food withdrawal/recall systems in place as part of their Food Safety Management System to fulfil these requirements. FBOs may wish to seek advice from the enforcement authority with whom they are registered or approved, and/or their Primary/Home authority for assurance that any system developed for this purpose is appropriate and compliant.'

Taken from: <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/food-traceability-withdrawals-and-recalls-guidance.pdf>

What is batch code or date mark for traceability?

A batch code is a unique number or combination of numbers and letters that identifies individual pre-packaged products or units that are made in one production run. The batch code may relate to a production date, piece of machinery, or a production team member. It can also be called a lot number.

Where no batch code is included, traceability can be assured by the use of date codes linking to an individual date of production. For highly perishable foods, the code will refer to 'Use By 25th December' and clearly link back to a production batch. Similarly, for other foods with a marked date 'Best Before 25th December, 2023' this will also link back to an individual production date and are applied to foods with a shelf life up to 3 months. For products that have a shelf life of between 3 and 18 months, businesses can use a 'Best Before End December 2023' and will have to also include a lot or batch number to be able to trace to an individual production date. Similarly, with longer life products of over 18 months where 'Best Before End 2023' marking is applied, other codes will also be needed.

Format of batch codes

There are no hard fast rules for the format of a batch code, but date is the most common and the most important thing is that it is understandable and relevant to your organisation.

Example

Tamar Valley Apple Co-op uses a Batch no of o8221. The o8 is the number of the batch (100 bottles per run) in a day of pasteurising runs. The number 2 refers to pasteuriser number 2, that the particular batch was pasteurised in and the 21 refers to the year that the juice was made in 2021.

Many companies mark batch codes using a Julian date calendar based on the day of the year and year date, such as 35923 which denotes 25th December, 2023 production date as 359th day of the year.



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How a batch code can help you if there's a problem

If a complaint or safety issue with your product is raised a batch code can help you refer back to records to be able to trace where products from a particular production day or run has gone, how it can be recalled or withdrawn from sale to prevent harm to health, or to inform customers to limit damage to reputation. This can also link to the actual batch numbers for ingredients that were used on the production date.

Keeping a log of customers who receive each batch codes

When sending out products to retailers, keep a record to record which batches have gone to which customer so in the event of needing to recall the products they can quickly be traced and any issue brought quickly under control.

What information should a batch number refer back to?

Keeping records from your production run that also lists the batch number is important to be able to help trace a problem if an issue arises and is important to demonstrate a robust food management plan.

Date of production

For a manufacturer, batch numbers of ingredient raw materials and packaging will be recorded and are therefore available as linked to each production date. Should there be a defective raw material batch, or production issue when the product is made, these systems will enable tracing the customers who received the defective batch and enabling withdrawal or recall.

By linking to the date of production, linkage is possible to confirm team members and supervisors working on the day, ingredient batches and suppliers, allergens in recipes and any recipe amendments from the production day, and the time of day made. Any taste notes, linkage to equipment, temperature checks during production and any chilling methods and records can be assured. There will also be a record of how many units were made in that particular batch and how many cases.

Where to include a batch number on a product

There is no legislation around where a batch number should be situated on a product, but it should be legible and easy to identify. If there is an outer case that products are delivered to then the batch code should be repeated on the outer case.

Further information

<https://www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/traceability-of-food/>

<https://www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/food-traceability-template/>

<https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/food-traceability-withdrawals-and-recalls-guidance.pdf>

