Medications' shelf life vs. expiration date: a NetWellness column
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Question: What is the difference between shelf life and the expiration date of a medication? As a general rule, does a medication have the same shelf life and expiration date? If a medication has both the expiration date and a shelf life printed on the box, can we still use the medication safely if the expiration date has already passed while the shelf life is still good?

Answer: The term "shelf life" of a drug slightly differs from a drug's "expiration date."

The shelf life generally relates to a drug's quality, whereas the expiration date relates to its safety.

Shelf life
A drug that has passed its shelf life might still be safe for consumption, but its quality is no longer guaranteed.

Shelf life is variably influenced by storage conditions, such as exposure to heat, light and moisture.

Expiration date and safety
The expiration date of a medication indicates the date the manufacturer or pharmacist guarantees the full potency and safety of a drug.
Some, but not all medications retain potency and are usually safe briefly following the expiration date, but you must check with a pharmacist about specific medications.

Some drugs, such as tetracycline antibiotics, can be dangerous if used after their expiration date.

**Which date to follow**

If a bottle has both the shelf life & expiration date listed, then it is advisable to use the earlier date as the time to avoid consumption. However, better still would be handing the dosage unit to your pharmacists so he or she can give you specific advice.

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**For more information, visit NetWellness** [Pharmacy and Medications](http://www.cleveland.com/healthfit/index.ssf/2009/07/medications_shelf_life_vs_expi.html) health topic.

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