Shelf Life of Canned Foods

I would like to know the age of the canned foods I purchase. Were they canned one or five years ago? Are there so many preservatives in these foods that they last years and years? Shouldn't we be able to understand those code numbers on the cans?

Codes vary from one food packer or processor to the next. Some foods have an easily recognized packing date imprinted on the top. Most, however, have their own code. There is little incentive for companies to change a system that is working well for them; especially, if they get few complaints from consumers.

Many companies have a toll-free number you can call to inquire about the code, or ask other questions. If you don't see the number on the label, remove it and see if its on the back of the label. Or, call directory assistance for toll free numbers at 1-800-555-1212. Give the company's name. This may be different from the brand name.

With one particular company, the first line of the code refers to specifics about the product. The second line, for example 31554, deals with packing. The first number, three, cites the last digit of the year it was packed, in this case 1993. The 155 uses the Julian calendar (commonly used by packers) to indicate the one-hundred and fifty-fifth day of the year. The final 4 indicated the packing shift.

All preservatives must be listed on the label. In canned foods, preservatives are used to maintain quality. The canning process keeps it safe. If a product is correctly processed, it should remain safe until opened or the seal is broken. The U.S. Army has found that canned meats, vegetables and jam were in "excellent states of preservation" after 46 years. However, long storage is not recommended. For high quality (versus safety), the broadest guideline given by the U.S.D.A. is to use high-acid canned food (fruits, tomatoes and pickled products) in 18 to 24 months, and low-acid (meats and vegetables) in two to five years.