

How to Get the First Day of the Previous Month in Excel

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January 8, 2026

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammed loot (2026). *How to Get the First Day of the Previous Month in Excel*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=125019>

Navigating Excel for advanced date manipulation often requires specialized functions that go beyond simple arithmetic. A common requirement in financial reporting and data analysis is the need to reliably retrieve the first day of the previous calendar month, regardless of the current date. Achieving this requires a precise formulaic approach, bypassing the complexities of differing month lengths and leap years. While several methods exist--including complex nesting of the DATE function combined with TODAY function components--the most efficient and robust technique utilizes the powerful **EOMONTH function**.

The core concept involves using the EOMONTH function to strategically locate the last day of the month that occurred **two months prior** to the reference date. By performing this calculation, we establish a fixed anchor point that is guaranteed to precede the target date. Once this anchor (the last day of the month before the previous month) is found, we simply add 1 day to it. This addition invariably lands us precisely on the **first day of the previous month**. This technique ensures accuracy across all date scenarios, simplifying complex date manipulation within spreadsheets.

The Core Formula for Finding the Previous Month's Start Date

To execute this sophisticated date retrieval efficiently, we rely on a concise and highly effective formula based on the **EOMONTH** function. This function determines the end of a month a specified number of months away from a starting date. By using a negative offset, we can travel backward in time.

The definitive formula to return the first day of the previous month relative to a specific cell (e.g., **A2**) is structured as follows:

=EOMONTH(A2,-2)+1

This particular formula returns the first day of the month immediately preceding the month recorded in cell **A2**. The structure is designed to be fully dynamic, adapting seamlessly to any date provided in the reference cell, ensuring that the result is always the first day (the 1st) of the prior month.

For instance, if the date stored in cell **A2** is **February 12, 2024 (2/12/2024)**, the calculation proceeds backward two months to the end of December 2023. By adding 1 day to December 31, 2023, this formula successfully returns **January 1, 2024 (1/1/2024)**. This demonstrates the formula's effectiveness in accurately isolating the desired historical start date.

Practical Example: Applying the Formula to a Dataset

To illustrate the practical application of this powerful date formula, consider a typical business scenario involving a dataset of transaction records. Often, analysts need to pair transaction dates

with their corresponding previous month's start date for standardized reporting periods or aggregation tasks. This standardized reporting ensures that monthly data comparisons are consistently aligned.

Suppose we are working with the following sample dataset in Excel, which includes various dates related to sales activities. Our objective is to generate a derived column that precisely identifies the first day of the month preceding each recorded sale date in the **Date** column:

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Date	Sales			
2	1/5/2024	10			
3	1/18/2024	14			
4	2/12/2024	19			
5	3/29/2024	25			
6	4/25/2024	23			
7	5/12/2024	28			
8	5/15/2024	22			
9	6/1/2024	40			
10	7/14/2024	23			
11	8/22/2024	15			
12					
13					
14					
15					

The table above represents a common data structure where calculations must be applied dynamically down an entire column. If the source dates are located in Column A, the calculated result should reside in a new column, such as Column C, allowing easy reference and verification of the output. The key is applying the formula once and then using Excel's fill handle feature to propagate the logic correctly across the dataset.

Implementing the EOMONTH Logic in the Spreadsheet

Based on our requirement to find the first day of the previous month for every date in the **Date** column (Column A), we must input the specific **EOMONTH** formula into the first data cell of our target column. Assuming our dates begin in cell **A2**, we will start the calculation in cell **C2**.

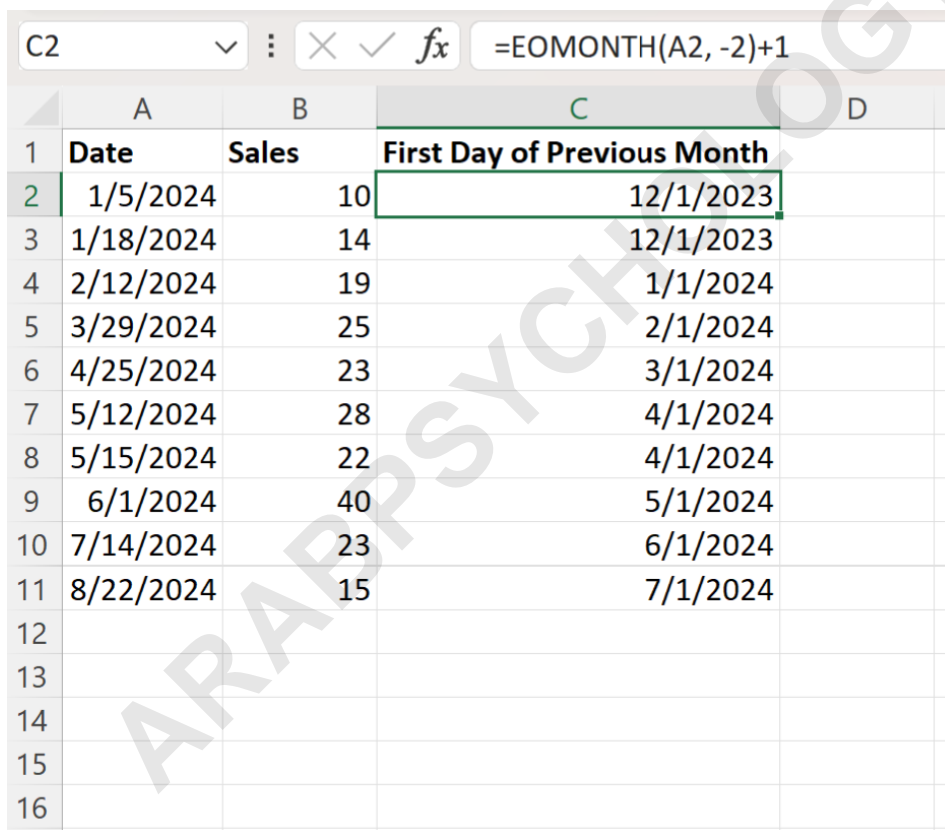
To begin the process, we type the following formula into cell **C2**, referencing the date in **A2**:

=EOMONTH(A2,-2)+1

This formula immediately calculates the correct starting date for the entry in A2. Once the calculation is verified for the initial row, we can efficiently apply this logic to the remainder of the dataset. This is achieved by clicking on the small square (the fill handle) at the bottom right corner of cell **C2** and dragging the formula downward, covering all rows that contain sales dates in Column A. This action automatically adjusts the cell references (e.g., A2 becomes A3, A4, and so on) ensuring accurate calculation for every row.

Analyzing the Calculated Results

After dragging the formula down the entire dataset, Column C will populate with the results, presenting the desired first day of the previous month for each corresponding date in Column A. This transformed dataset provides the standardized reference point necessary for various analytical tasks, such as generating pivot tables based on standardized monthly buckets.



The screenshot shows an Excel spreadsheet with the following data:

	A	B	C	D
1	Date	Sales	First Day of Previous Month	
2	1/5/2024	10	12/1/2023	
3	1/18/2024	14	12/1/2023	
4	2/12/2024	19	1/1/2024	
5	3/29/2024	25	2/1/2024	
6	4/25/2024	23	3/1/2024	
7	5/12/2024	28	4/1/2024	
8	5/15/2024	22	4/1/2024	
9	6/1/2024	40	5/1/2024	
10	7/14/2024	23	6/1/2024	
11	8/22/2024	15	7/1/2024	
12				
13				
14				
15				
16				

As clearly demonstrated by the updated table, Column C successfully shows the first day of the month preceding the date listed in Column A. Observing specific examples helps confirm the accuracy and robustness of the formula across different months and years:

For the date **1/5/2024** (January), the previous month is December 2023. The formula correctly returns **12/1/2023**.

Similarly, for the date **1/18/2024**, which is also in January, the result remains **12/1/2023**, demonstrating consistency regardless of the day of the month chosen in the source cell.

When the date transitions to **2/12/2024** (February), the formula correctly identifies the previous month as January 2024 and returns **1/1/2024**.

This structured output confirms that the methodology effectively handles month and year transitions, providing a reliable solution for backward date indexing.

Detailed Breakdown: Deconstructing the EOMONTH(-2)+1 Logic

Understanding the internal mechanics of the formula `=EOMONTH(A2,-2)+1` is crucial for anyone seeking mastery over Excel's date functions. The formula leverages the **EOMONTH** function's unique ability to return the last day of a month a specified number of periods away from a starting date, which is far more efficient than attempting to manually calculate month lengths.

Recall the full formula: `=EOMONTH(A2,-2)+1`. The central component, `EOMONTH(A2,-2)`, instructs Excel to find the last day of the month that is **two months before** the date referenced in cell **A2**. Why two months? If we only moved back one month (i.e., `EOMONTH(A2,-1)`), we would land on the last day of the previous month, which is close but not the desired starting day.

By specifying the offset as **-2**, we deliberately overshoot our target month by one. For instance, if the date in cell **A2** is **January 5, 2024**, applying `EOMONTH(A2,-2)` yields the last day of November 2023, which is **11/30/2023**. November 2023 is the month two periods before January 2024.

Once `EOMONTH(A2,-2)` returns the absolute last day of the month preceding our target month, the final step, `+1`, is executed. Adding 1 to November 30, 2023, advances the date by exactly one day, resulting in **December 1, 2023**. December 1st is precisely the first day of the previous month relative to January 5, 2024. This two-step process--over-shooting by two months and then advancing one day--is the mathematical elegance that solves the problem universally.

It is important to note that the **EOMONTH** function is fully documented by Microsoft and is an essential tool for advanced date reporting within Excel. It eliminates the need for complex conditional logic (like IF statements) to account for months having 30, 31, 28, or 29 days, making the formula exceptionally reliable.

Alternative Approaches to Date Calculation

While the **EOMONTH** method is preferred for its conciseness and robustness, users sometimes explore alternative approaches, especially in legacy spreadsheets or when trying to avoid specific functions. These alternatives typically involve manipulating the components of the current date using functions like **YEAR**, **MONTH**, and **DAY**, and then reassembling them using the DATE

function.

One less efficient alternative involves obtaining the current date using the TODAY function, extracting its components, and then calculating the previous month index. This often requires complex conditional logic to handle the transition from January to the previous year's December. A formula using this method might look something like `=DATE(YEAR(TODAY()), MONTH(TODAY())-1, 1)`, though this specific formula fails if the current month is January, necessitating an IF statement to adjust the year backward, adding complexity.

The primary advantage of the **EOMONTH(-2)+1** formula is that it automatically handles all year and month transitions implicitly, requiring no complex nested functions. It operates on the serial number representation of dates in Excel, ensuring that all date arithmetic is handled correctly behind the scenes, thereby minimizing the possibility of calculation errors commonly associated with manual month manipulation.

Conclusion: Mastering Date Indexing

Retrieving the first day of the previous month is a foundational skill in advanced data analysis within Excel. By utilizing the **EOMONTH** function with the strategic offset of negative two months and subsequently adding one day, analysts gain a fast, reliable, and standardized method for date indexing.

The formula `=EOMONTH(A2, -2) + 1` is the gold standard for this specific operation, providing a clean solution that bypasses the complexities of varying calendar lengths and ensuring accurate calculation across year-end boundaries. Mastering this technique empowers users to build more robust and scalable financial models and reporting dashboards.

The following resources offer additional tutorials explaining how to perform other common and complex date operations and calculations in Excel, further enhancing your analytical capabilities:

Tutorial on finding the last day of the current month.

Guide to calculating the difference between two dates in working days.

Instructions for formatting dates based on regional settings.