



Preparing for a Weather Emergency

Severe weather events can mean power outages, floods, and other problems that can affect the safety of food. Knowing what to do before and after a weather event can help you reduce your risk of illness. By following these guidelines, you can also minimize the amount of food that may be lost due to spoilage.

Especially in storm-prone areas, power outages can be a common problem. Power outages can occur at any time of the year and it may take from a few hours to several days for electricity to be restored to residential areas. Without electricity or a cold source, food stored in refrigerators and freezers can become unsafe. Bacteria in food grow rapidly at temperatures between 40 and 140 °F, and if these foods are consumed, people can become very sick.

Steps to follow to prepare for a possible weather emergency

- Keep an appliance thermometer in the refrigerator and freezer. An appliance thermometer indicates the temperature in the refrigerator and freezer. In the case of a power outage, it can help determine the safety of the food.
- Make sure the freezer is at 0 °F or below and the refrigerator is at 40 °F or below.
- Freeze containers of water ahead of time for ice to help keep food cold in the freezer, refrigerator, or coolers after the power is out. Freeze gel packs for use in coolers.
- Freeze refrigerated items such as leftovers, milk and fresh meat and poultry that you may not need immediately — this helps keep them at a safe temperature longer.
- Plan ahead and know where dry ice and block ice can be purchased.
- Have coolers on hand to keep refrigerated food cold if the power will be out for more than 4 hours.
- Group food together in the freezer — this helps the food stay cold longer.
- Store food on shelves that will be safely out of the way of contaminated water in case of flooding.

Steps to follow after the weather emergency

- Keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible to maintain the cold temperature.
- The refrigerator will keep food safe for about 4 hours if it is unopened. A full freezer will hold the temperature for approximately 48 hours (24 hours if it is half full) and the door remains closed.
- Discard refrigerated perishable food such as meat, poultry, fish, soft cheeses, milk, eggs, leftovers, and deli items after 4 hours without power.
- Food may be safely refrozen if it still contains ice crystals or is at 40 °F or below when checked with a food thermometer.
- Never taste a food to determine its safety!
- Obtain dry or block ice to keep your refrigerator and freezer as cold as possible if the power is going to be out for a prolonged period of time. Fifty pounds of dry ice should hold an 18-cubic-foot full freezer for 2 days.
- If the power has been out for several days, check the temperature of the freezer with an appliance thermometer. If the appliance thermometer reads 40 °F or below, the food is safe to refreeze.
- If a thermometer has not been kept in the freezer, check each package of food to determine its safety. If the food still contains ice crystals, the food is safe.

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During Snow and Ice Storms

- During a snowstorm, do not place perishable food out in the snow. Outside temperatures can vary and food can be exposed to unsanitary conditions and animals. Instead, make ice. Fill buckets, empty milk containers, or cans with water and leave them outside to freeze. Use this ice to help keep food cold in the freezer, refrigerator, or coolers.

If Flooding Occurs

- Drink only bottled water that has not come in contact with flood water. Discard any bottled water that may have come in contact with flood water.
- Discard any food that is not in a waterproof container if there is any chance it may have come in contact with flood water. Food containers that are not waterproof include those with screw-caps, snap lids, pull tops, and crimped caps.
- Discard wooden cutting boards, plastic utensils, baby bottle nipples, and pacifiers that may have come in contact with flood water.
- Undamaged, commercially prepared foods in all-metal cans and retort pouches (for example, flexible, shelf-stable juice or seafood pouches) can be saved. Follow the "Steps to Salvage All-Metal Cans and Retort Pouches" in the publication *Keeping Food Safe During an Emergency* at:

www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/keeping_food_Safe_during_an_emergency/index.asp

- Thoroughly wash all metal pans, ceramic dishes, and utensils that came in contact with flood water with hot soapy water. Sanitize by boiling them in clean water or by immersing them for 15 minutes in a solution of 1 tablespoon unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water.

To Remove Odors from Refrigerators and Freezers

If food has spoiled in a refrigerator or freezer and odors from the food remain, they may be difficult to remove. The following procedures may help but may have to be repeated several times.

- Dispose of any spoiled or questionable food.
- Remove shelves, crispers, and ice trays. Wash them thoroughly with hot water and detergent. Then rinse with a sanitizing solution (1 tablespoon unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of water).
- Wash the interior of the refrigerator and freezer, including the door and gasket, with hot water and baking soda. Rinse with sanitizing solution as above.
- Leave the door open for about 15 minutes to allow free air circulation. For more information about removing odors, see

www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/Removing_Odors_from_Refrigerators_and_Freezers.pdf

When in Doubt, Throw it Out!

Food Safety Questions?

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at **1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)**; TTY: 1-800-256-7072.



The Hotline is open year-round Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish). Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at www.fsis.usda.gov.

Send E-mail questions to MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov.

Ask Karen!

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7.



AskKaren.gov