

USDA CONSUMER ALERT: Keeping Food Safe During An Emergency

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WASHINGTON - March 19, 2008 - The U.S. Department of Agriculture is providing recommendations to the regions affected by severe weather and flooding in the Central United States. USDA is hopeful that this information will help minimize the potential for foodborne illnesses due to food spoilage from power outages and other problems that are often associated with severe weather events.

"Power outages can occur at any time of the year and it often takes from a few hours to several days for electricity to be restored to residential areas," said USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety Dr. Richard Raymond. "Without electricity or a cold source, foods 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 will indicate the temperature in the refrigerator and freezer in case of a power outage and 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 for ice to help keep food cold in the freezer, refrigerator or coolers after the power is out.
- 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.
- Store food on shelves that will be safely out of the way of contaminated water in case of flooding.
- Have coolers on hand to keep refrigerator food cold if the power will be out for more than 4 hours. Purchase or make ice cubes and store in the freezer for use in the refrigerator or in a cooler. Freeze gel packs ahead of time for use in coolers.
- Group food together in the freezer - this helps the food stay cold longer.

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 safely cold 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.
- Drink only bottled water if flooding has occurred.
- Discard any food that is not in a waterproof container if there is any chance that it has come into contact with flood water. Discard wooden cutting boards, plastic utensils, baby bottle nipples and pacifiers.
- 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 and sanitize by boiling them in clean water or by immersing them for 15 minutes in a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water.
- **When in Doubt, Throw it Out!**

FSIS has available a Public Service Announcement (PSA), available in 30- and 60-second versions, illustrating practical food safety recommendations for handling and consuming foods stored in refrigerators and freezers during, and after, a power outage. Consumers are encouraged to view the PSA at: http://www.fsis.usda.gov/news/Food_Safety_Videos/.

News organizations and power companies can obtain hard copy (Beta and DVD) versions of the PSA by contacting the Food Safety Education Staff in FSIS' Office of Public Affairs Education and Outreach by calling (301) 344-4757.

Consumers with food safety questions can "Ask Karen," the FSIS virtual representative available 24 hours a day at AskKaren.gov. The toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) is available in English and Spanish and can be reached from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Eastern Time) Monday through Friday. Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day.