

factsheet

Food Safety After a Power Outage

Being Prepared

Most households will at some time face a power outage as a result of a snowstorm, ice storm, natural disaster or flooding. These emergencies may create a problem with food safety. Below are some tips to help you prepare for such an emergency, and for dealing with food safety.

Refrigerators and Freezers:

If you have warning that your electrical power will be interrupted or live in an area subject to power failures during storms:

- Turn the refrigerator or freezer control to it's coldest setting.
- Keep several freezer gel packs frozen in your freezer.
- If there is space in your freezer, fill containers such as empty milk cartons with water and freeze. These blocks of ice will help maintain temperatures.
- Group foods together in the freezer so that they will protect each other.
- Have one or more coolers on hand to store refrigerated foods.
- Know where you can obtain block ice for use in your refrigerator.
- Develop freezer sharing plans with friends or neighbours.
- Keep a list of the foods in your freezer so you know what is in it without opening.
- The colder the room the longer the refrigerator will stay cold.

If there is any possibility of flooding, basement freezers should be raised up off the floor. This can be done by putting the unit on cement blocks.

Keep an appliance thermometer in your refrigerator or freezer at all times. This will let you know how cold your unit remains during the power outage

Food:

You should stock up on shelf-stable foods — foods that do not require refrigeration. Some suggested foods are:

- ready-to-eat canned foods
- shelf-stable milk (UHT)
- canned fruits and juices
- high-energy foods such as peanut butter, trail mix or nuts

Water:

Provide bottled water for drinking. Water supplies can be affected by the disruption of power needed to pump water into the home. Plan ahead and provide for an emergency water supply — about a gallon of water per day for each person.

Preparing Food:

During a power outage you may have no heat or refrigeration and a limited water supply. When you have limited heat for cooking you should choose foods that cook quickly and prepare one-dish meals or plan no-cook meals. Some other tips for preparing food are:

- Cook only what is needed for one meal to limit leftovers.
- If using baby formula, make up only enough for immediate use. Consider powdered formula which will not require refrigeration after opening.
- Wood stoves and fireplaces provide heat sources for cooking. Foods can be cooked on skewers, grilled or wrapped in foil and cooked in the fireplace.
- Candle warmers and other devices such as fondue pots may be used for heating food.
- Charcoal or gas barbecues or camp stoves can only be used outdoors.

Is My Food Safe?... Knowing What to Keep

Power outage is probably the most common problem facing a household during a storm or natural disaster. This information will help determine the safety of food during a power outage or when your refrigerator or freezer is not working.

Refrigerated Foods

Foods will generally stay safe in a refrigerator for several hours. If the door is kept closed, food will remain cold for four to six hours.

- Placing blocks of ice in the refrigerator will help in keeping the temperature low.
- If possible transfer food to a refrigerator or freezer that is operating.
- Do not open the door any more than is necessary.

To Save or Discard

Discard any perishable foods that may have been above 40°F for more than two hours and any food that feels warm or has an unusual odor or color. Block ice can be put in the freezer unit of your refrigerator along with your perishable items such as meat, poultry and milk. This will keep these foods colder.

The following are often implicated with food-borne illness and should be discarded if stored above 4°C (40°F) for two hours or more:

- raw or cooked meat, poultry, seafood and luncheon meats
- casseroles, stews or soups
- milk and soft cheeses
- homemade mayonnaise or dressings
- cooked pasta, potatoes or rice
- salads made with any of these foods

Foods that can be stored above 4°C (40°F) for several days include:

- butter and margarine
- hard or processed cheese
- fresh fruits and vegetables
- mustard, ketchup, olives
- salad dressings, peanut butter, barbeque sauce
- jams and jellies

Frozen Foods

As long as the power is off, keep the door of the freezer closed as much as possible.

Frozen foods in a fully-stocked chest or upright freezer will stay frozen up to two days, in a half-filled freezer for about one day. If the power is expected to be off for several days it is safer to move the food to another freezer. If moving frozen foods, wrap in newspapers and place in insulated coolers. Covering the freezer with blankets or quilts will also help keep it cold.

REMEMBER
If in doubt, toss it out

Keep raw meats wrapped and take care that their juices do not drip on cooked or other ready-to-eat foods.

To Save or Discard

Foods may partially or completely thaw before power can be restored. The following will help you decide what to keep and what to discard:

- Food that has thawed but is still cold or feels cold as if refrigerated (that is 4°C [40°F] or below) may be refrozen. Raw meat or poultry should first be cooked before freezing.
- Discard any foods where the temperature has been over 4°C (40°F) for longer than two hours.
- Fish and shellfish should not be refrozen if they have completely thawed.
- Frozen dinners, desserts and ice cream should not be refrozen.
- Prepared foods may be refrozen but should be marked so they can be used as soon as possible.

A thermometer placed in your refrigerator or freezer will show you how cold the food has remained during the power outage and is the safest way to determine if the food can be saved.

For further information on food safety visit the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture Food Safety website at <http://www.gov.ns.ca/agri/foodsafety/>