

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-cubicfoot 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.

Information was gathered from USDA.