

Food Safety During Power Outages

Recently had a power outage? Here's what you need to know for food safety:

Keep a thermometer in the refrigerator and freezer at all times to see if food is being stored at safe temperatures. The temperature should be 41° F for the refrigerator and 0° F for the freezer. The key to determining the safety of foods in the refrigerator and freezer is how cold they are. Most foodborne illness is caused by bacteria that multiply rapidly at temperatures above 41° F.

Leave the freezer door closed. A full freezer should keep food safe about 2 days, a half-full freezer, about 1 day. Add bags of ice or dry ice to the freezer if it appears the power will be off for an extended time. You can safely refreeze thawed foods that still contain ice crystals.

Refrigerated items should be safe as long as the power is out no more than 4 to 6 hours. Discard any potentially hazardous foods, such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products that have been above 41° F for 2 hours or more, and any food that has an unusual odor, color or texture. Leave the door closed; every time you open it, cold air escapes causing the foods inside to reach unsafe temperatures.

If the power has been out for only a few hours, it's okay to keep less-perishable foods. Fresh fruits and vegetables, peanut butter, nuts, hard and processed cheeses, condiments, butter and margarine often keep for several days at room temperature. Toss food out, however, if it turns moldy or smells bad.

If it appears the power will be off for an extended time, transfer potentially hazardous foods to a refrigerated truck. Keep a thermometer in the truck to be sure the food stays at 41° F or below.

Never taste food to determine its safety. Some foods may look and smell fine, but if they have been above 41° F longer than 2 hours, bacteria able to cause foodborne illness can begin to multiply very rapidly. Some types of bacteria will produce toxins that are not destroyed by cooking or reheating and can possibly cause illness.

Dispose food in double-bagged plastic garbage bags and should be well tied, and/or in a sealed plastic containers or sealed in zipper-locked plastic bags.

When the power is restored, allow time for the refrigerators to reach 41° F or below before restocking.