



The Power is Off: Is the Food Still Safe?

If the power goes off in your home due to a winter storm or an unexpected summertime power outage, it may be difficult to determine whether the food in your refrigerator or freezer is safe to consume. This fact sheet will help you to decide whether to keep or discard food items in your home.

Refrigerated Foods

Generally, refrigerated foods are safe as long as the power is out for no more than a few hours. Keep the door closed; food will remain chilled for four to six hours if the door is not opened. When power is restored, check all food according to the following guidelines.

Foods to Keep

The following foods can be safely stored at room temperature (above 40°F) a few days. These foods will be safe to consume, even if the power is out for a 1 to 2 days.

- Butter and margarine
- Hard cheeses (such as Cheddar, Swiss)
- Fresh fruits and vegetables
- Fruit juices*
- Dried fruits and nuts
- Fresh herbs and spices
- Opened jars of salad dressing, peanut butter, jelly, relish, barbecue sauce*
- Mustard, ketchup, and olives*
- Fruit pies*
- Bread, rolls, cakes and muffins

*Note: These foods may spoil due to yeast and mold growth if left at room temperature.

Foods to Discard

Some refrigerated food may be unsafe to consume if stored above 40°F for more than 2 hours. The following foods should be discarded.

- Raw or cooked meat, poultry, seafood
- Meat-topped pizza, lunchmeat
- Casseroles, stews or soups
- Milk/cream, yogurt, soft cheese (such as feta and Brie)
- Mayonnaise, tartar sauce, or creamy dressings
- Cooked pasta, potato, rice and salads prepared from these foods
- Cookie dough
- Fresh eggs, egg substitutes
- Cream-filled pastries
- Custard, chiffon or cheese pies
- Gravies

It is important to inspect any food for unusual odor or appearance. Discard any suspect food in the trash.

Frozen Foods

Food in a freezer will stay frozen for about two days; a half-full freezer for about one day. The kind of food in the freezer makes a difference; meats and vegetables will stay frozen longer than bread. To preserve food in your freezer, keep the door closed as much as possible.

Refreezing Frozen Foods

*Despite your best efforts, the food in your freezer may partially or completely thaw before power is restored. **Foods may be safely refrozen if they still contain ice crystals.** Partial thawing and refreezing does, however, reduce the quality of foods. Foods that have completely thawed, but are still cold--40°F or below--may be refrozen if the following steps are followed:*

- Fruits--may be refrozen if they still look and smell good
- Vegetables--should not be refrozen if thawed because bacteria multiply rapidly in these foods. If ice crystals are present, re-freezing is possible.
- Meat and poultry--should be discarded if the meat temperature has exceeded 40°F for two hours or more. Discard if the color or odor is poor or questionable, even if the meat is still cold. Unspoiled meat may be cooked and then refrozen.
- Fish and shellfish--should not be refrozen if thawed completely since these foods are extremely perishable. May refreeze if ice crystals are present.
- Frozen dinner and ice cream--do not refreeze.

Hints on Saving as Much Food as Possible

FIRST, use perishable food and foods from the refrigerator, THEN use foods from the freezer. Minimize the number of times you open the freezer door by posting a list of freezer contents. In a well-filled, well-insulated freezer, foods will usually still have ice crystals in their centers. Covering the freezer with blankets will help to hold in the cold. Be sure to pin blankets back so that the air vent is not covered. FINALLY, begin to use non-perishable foods and staples.

Cooking without Power

For emergency cooking you can use a fire, a charcoal grill or camp stove outdoors only. You can also heat previously cooked food that tastes better warm with candle warmers, chafing dishes and fondue pots. Do not use these warming items for cooking raw foods that have to be thoroughly cooked to be safe (for example: raw meats, poultry, seafood, eggs and egg-containing products).

For more information, consult The Disaster Handbook available on the Web:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/news/handbook.html>

Questions about the safety of meat and poultry items can be answered by the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline: 1-800-535-4555.