

## The Power is Off: Is the Food Still Safe?

Power outages are probably the most common problem facing households during a natural disaster or an emergency. Follow the guidelines below when deciding whether food is safe if the power has been off.

### 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 4-6 hours if the door is not opened. When power is restored, check all food according to the following guidelines.

#### Foods That Can be Safely Stored at Room Temperature (above 40°F) a Few Days:

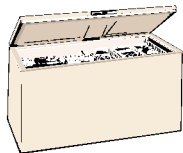
- ◆ Butter and margarine
- ◆ Hard cheeses (such as Cheddar, Swiss)
- ◆ Fresh fruits and vegetables
- ◆ Fruit juices\*
- ◆ Dried fruits and nuts
- ◆ Fresh herbs and spices
- ◆ Opened jars of salad dressing, peanut butter, jelly, relish, taco sauce, barbecue sauce\*
- ◆ Mustard, ketchup and olives\*
-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

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

#### Foods to Discard:

Other refrigerated foods stored above 40°F over 2 hours should be discarded. Throw away moldy items or food with unusual odor or appearance. It is especially important to discard the following:

- ◆ Raw or cooked meat, poultry, seafood
- ◆ Meat-topped pizza, lunchmeats
- ◆ 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
- ◆ Refrigerator and cookie dough
- ◆ Fresh eggs, egg substitutes
- ◆ Cream-filled pastries
- ◆ Custard, chiffon or cheese pies
- ◆ Gravies



### Frozen Foods

Food in a freezer will stay frozen for about 2 days; a half-full freezer for about 1 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.

### What to Do With Frozen Food if It Thaws:

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 reduces the quality of foods, particularly fruits, vegetables and prepared foods. Foods which have completely thawed, but are still cold – about 40°F – 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 2 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 dinners 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.



### Resources

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

### References

Andress, E. and Harrison, J. Short Term Food Storage. University of Georgia Extension, Athens, GA. January 1999. (<http://www.fcs.uga.edu/outreach/coopex/>)

Scott, D. and Stark, C. Food Safety and Natural Disasters. Cornell Cooperative Extension, Ithaca, NY. Updated February 13, 1998. (<http://www.cce.cornell.edu/health/safety/food-safety.html>)

Contact person: Dr. Barbara Ingham, Extension Food Scientist, 608-263-7383 ([bhingham@facstaff.wisc.edu](mailto:bhingham@facstaff.wisc.edu))