

## **Keeping Your Food Safe During Power Outages**

It is that time of year when we start to experience more frequent blustery weather, heavy precipitation, and the possibility of snow and ice buildup on power lines, all of which can lead to an increased likelihood of power failures. We often receive questions regarding the safety of food after a power outage has occurred. However, to reduce the loss of food during one of these events, it is best to be prepared before it happens.

The first step to keeping your food safe, is to have thermometers in your refrigerator and freezer. These can often be purchased at your local hardware store and are relatively inexpensive. Monitoring your refrigerator and freezer temperature will ensure your equipment is functioning properly and food is being held at the correct temperature (40°F or below in the refrigerator and 0°F or below in the freezer), regardless of the weather and power situation.

### ***Refrigerated Food***

During an outage, the door to the refrigerator should be left closed as much as possible. As long as the power has been out for less than 4 hours, your food should still be safe. You will need to verify that the temperature of the refrigerator has not exceeded 40°F. Perishable food, such as meat, poultry, eggs, dairy, or leftovers, should be discarded if the temperature of the refrigerator has exceeded 40°F for more than 2 hours. [Foodsafety.gov](https://www.foodsafety.gov) has a list of which foods will need to be discarded, and which can be kept if your refrigerator has exceeded these limits.

### ***Frozen Food***

Keep your freezer door closed during the outage. When the power comes back on, you will need to check the freezer thermometer. If the thermometer reads 40°F or below, the food is still safe and can be re-frozen. The thermometer is the best way to ensure safety, but if you do not have a freezer thermometer, you can do a visual inspection of the food. If the food still contains ice crystals, it is safe to refreeze the food, but if no crystals are present then the food will need to be discarded.

### ***Alternative Options***

To keep your food cold during a prolonged outage, you may consider buying bags of ice and placing them around food in the refrigerator or freezer. Another option is to remove the food and store it in coolers with plenty of ice. Be sure to keep meat, poultry, seafood, and other items in a separate cooler away from foods which are ready to eat (e.g. produce, cheese, dairy). Keep the coolers, refrigerator, or freezer well-stocked with ice to maintain the temperature at or below 40°F.

Regardless of the weather, never store food outside to keep it cold. Outside temperatures can vary widely, and the sun's rays can cause heating of the packaging and surfaces to temperatures high enough to cause the food to become unsafe. Additionally, the food could easily be exposed to other unsafe conditions, such as blowing soil or contact with a variety of wild animals and your neighbor's cat.

Most importantly, never taste food to see if it is still "good." Even one small bite of food that was not held at the proper temperature could result in severe illness or death. Additionally, the appearance or odor of food, aside from determining if food still contains ice crystals, is not a reliable method of discerning whether the food is safe to eat.

Buying thermometers for your equipment now, and keeping these tips handy, will ensure you are prepared and greatly reduce the amount of food you will need to throw out during the next outage. For

more tips on keeping food safe during an outage or emergency, contact your local Extension office or visit <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-safety-education/get-answers/food-safety-fact-sheets/emergency-preparedness>.

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