

# Power Outages

Power outages can cause a number of safety concerns; knowing the following information can help.

## Before a power outage

- Register life-sustaining and medical equipment with your utility company.
- Consider buying a generator. When installing a generator, follow the instructions carefully. Keep your generator outside and run a cord inside. Don't connect your generator to main service panels—it's dangerous! Be sure to place a carbon monoxide detector indoors.
- Make sure your disaster preparedness kit contains light sticks, flashlights, a battery-powered radio with extra batteries and a wind-up clock.
- Have a corded telephone available — cordless phones will not work when the power is out.
- Have a safe alternative heat source and supply of fuel. **Never burn charcoal or use a generator indoors.**
- If you own an electric garage door opener, know how to open the door without power.

## During a power outage

- Turn off lights and electrical appliances except for the refrigerator and freezer. Even if it is dark, turn light switches and buttons on lamps or appliances to the “off” position.
- Unplug computers and other sensitive equipment to protect them from possible surges when the power is restored.
- Leave one lamp on so you will know when power is restored. Wait at least 15 minutes after power is restored before turning on other appliances.
- Conserve water, especially if you use well water.
- Never use gas ovens, gas ranges, barbecues or portable or propane heaters for indoor heating—they use oxygen and create carbon monoxide that can cause suffocation.
- Candles can cause a fire. It's far better to use battery-operated flashlights or glow sticks for lighting.
- Using a kerosene heater, gas lantern or stove inside the house can be dangerous. Maintain proper ventilation at all times to avoid a build up of toxic fumes, and be sure to have a carbon monoxide detector.
- Stay away from downed power lines and sagging trees with broken limbs.

## Keep food safe

- Use and store food carefully to prevent foodborne illness when power outages make refrigeration unavailable.
- Use foods first that can spoil most rapidly.
- Keep doors to refrigerators and freezers closed. Your refrigerator's freezer will keep food frozen for up to a day. A separate fully-loaded freezer will keep food frozen for two days.
- Use an ice chest packed with ice or snow to keep food cold. Buy dry ice to save frozen food. Do not handle dry ice with your bare hands. Use blocks or bags of ice to save

refrigerator foods.

- Use caution if storing food outside during winter to keep it cold. The outside temperature varies, especially in the sun. Frozen food may thaw and refrigerator food may become warm enough to grow bacteria. Food stored outside must be secured from contamination by animals.
- **If in doubt, throw it out.** Throw out meat, seafood, dairy products and cooked food that does not feel cold.
- Never taste suspect food. Even if food looks and smells fine, illness-causing bacteria may be present.

## **FACT SHEET**

### **Keep food safe during power outages**

#### **How can a power outage cause problems with my food?**

Power outages can affect refrigeration and safe cooking practices. More than 250 diseases can be caused by bacteria found in contaminated raw or undercooked food, such as meat, milk, eggs, fish or shellfish. Proper storage and cooking of these foods can help prevent foodborne illness.

#### **Can I do anything to protect myself before the power outage begins?**

Yes. If you know or think that your power will be out for an extended a period of time, use foods that can spoil rapidly before those that keep longer. Find out now where you can buy dry ice to extend the life of your freezer, or blocks of ice for the refrigerator. Purchase an ice chest.

#### **How can I keep food cold?**

Keep doors to refrigerators and freezers closed to conserve cold air. Freezers that are part of a refrigerator-freezer combination will keep food frozen for up to a day. A free-standing chest or upright freezer will keep food frozen solid for two days if it is fully loaded. A half-full freezer will keep food frozen for a day, especially if the food has been grouped together.

#### **What if the power outage lasts more than one day?**

An ice chest packed with ice or snow can keep food cold. It is most important to keep meat, seafood and dairy products cold. Purchase dry ice from a local ice company to save frozen food. Do not handle dry ice with your bare hands or use it on refrigerator foods, it is too cold. For the refrigerator, purchase block ice from a local ice company or bags of ice at a convenience store.

#### **What if I can't get everything into my ice chest?**

It is most important to keep meat, seafood and dairy products cold. In cool weather, other items can be stored in a cardboard box in a garage or shed. Generally, the following items can be kept on a countertop or in the garage:

- jams and jellies
- butter and margarine
- ketchup, mustard, pickles, relish and similar condiments
- fresh fruit and vegetables

**It's winter. Can I store food outside?**

No. The outside temperature varies from hour to hour. The sun may thaw frozen foods or warm refrigerator foods enough to grow bacteria. The outside temperature also is not suitable for both refrigerator and freezer foods. If it is 25 degrees Fahrenheit, it is too cold for refrigerator foods but not cold enough for frozen food. Food stored outside may also be contaminated by animals.

**How can I tell if food is safe?**

If food is cold to touch, and you know it has not been above 45 degrees Fahrenheit for more than one hour or two, it is probably safe to keep, use or refreeze. Discard all meat, seafood, dairy products or cooked food that does not feel cold to the touch. Even under proper refrigeration, many raw foods should be kept only two to three days before they are cooked, frozen or thrown away. If in doubt, throw it out. Never taste suspect food. It may look and smell fine, even though the bacteria that cause foodborne illness is present.

**Where can I get more information?**

Contact your local health department or the cooperative extension office in your area.