

When Flooding Occurs – Food Salvage

Food contamination is often a problem after a flood because flood water can carry mud, raw sewage, chemicals, and fuel. Filth and disease-causing bacteria can contaminate any food the floodwater touches, making the food unsafe to eat. This fact sheet provides tips on safe handling of food impacted by flood waters.

Never taste food to determine its safety. **If in doubt, throw it out.**

Throw away any food that is not in a waterproof container if there is any chance that it has come into contact with flood water.

- Food containers that are not waterproof include those with screw-caps, snap lids, pull tops, and crimped caps.
- Also throw away cardboard juice/milk/baby formula boxes and home canned foods if they have come in contact with flood water, because they cannot be effectively cleaned and sanitized.

Look at canned foods and **discard any food in damaged cans**. Can damage includes swelling, leakage, punctures, holes, fractures, extensive deep rusting, or crushing/denting severe enough to prevent normal stacking or opening with a manual, wheel-type can opener.

Undamaged, commercially prepared foods in **all-metal cans** and **retort pouches** (like flexible, shelf-stable juice or seafood pouches) can be saved if you follow this procedure:

1. Remove the labels, if they are the removable kind, since they can take in dirt and bacteria.
2. Brush or wipe away any dirt or silt.
3. Thoroughly wash the cans or retort pouches with soap and water, using hot water if it is available. Rinse the cans or retort pouches with water that is safe for drinking, if available, since dirt or leftover soap will reduce the effectiveness of chlorine sanitation.
4. Sanitize cans and retort pouches in one of the two following ways:
 - Place completely in water and allow the water to come to a boil and continue boiling for 2 minutes, or
 - Place completely in a freshly-made unscented liquid bleach solution **prepared following manufacturers label instructions for sanitizing**.
5. Air dry cans or retort pouches for a minimum of 1 hour before opening or storing.
6. If the labels were removable, then re-label your cans or retort pouches, including the expiration date (if available), with a marking pen.
7. Food in reconditioned cans or retort pouches should be used as soon as possible thereafter.

Produce from home gardens should be thrown away if it has been in contact with flood waters.

If the floodwater contained waste from septic tanks or other sources of raw sewage; your garden will take about a month to recover. Do not eat or preserve food during this time.

Food Safety During a Power Outage

When the power goes out for a long time there is a risk that food in your refrigerator and freezer could spoil or become unsafe. This fact sheet provides tips for keeping food safe during and after a power outage.

Be Prepared

Make sure you have appliance thermometers in your refrigerator and freezer.

- Keep your freezer at or below **0 °F**, and the refrigerator at or below **40 °F**.
- In case of a power outage, the appliance thermometers will show the temperatures in the refrigerator and freezer to help you decide if the food is safe.

If possible, freeze containers of water for ice before a power outage to help keep food cold in the freezer, refrigerator, or coolers in case the power goes out.

When the Power Goes Out

Keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible to keep the cold temperature.

- The refrigerator will keep food cold for about 4 hours if it is unopened.
- A full freezer will keep the temperature for about 48 hours (24 hours if it is half full) if the door remains closed.

Once Power is Restored

Safe Cooking Temperatures as measured with a food thermometer	Internal Temperature
Ground Meat (except Poultry)	160°F
Fresh Beef, Pork, Veal, Lamb	145°F
Poultry (Whole cuts or Ground)	165°F
Seafood	145°F
Leftovers & Casseroles	165°F

If your freezer temperature reads 40°F or below, the food is safe and may be refrozen.

- If a thermometer has not been kept in the freezer, check each package of food to determine its safety. You can't rely on how it looks or smells. If the food still contains ice crystals or is 40 °F or below, it is safe to refreeze or cook.

Refrigerated food should be safe as long as the temperature did not rise above 40°F.

- Throw away any perishable food (such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, or leftovers) that have been above 40°F for two hours or more.

If you plan to eat refrigerated or frozen meat, poultry, fish or eggs while it is still at safe temperatures, it's important that each item is thoroughly cooked to its proper temperature to assure that any foodborne bacteria that may be present are destroyed.

Resources

CDC: [About Four Steps to Food Safety](#)

CDC: [Keep Food Safe After a Disaster or Emergency](#)

CDC: [People at Increased Risk for Food Poisoning](#)