

Flood Recovery:

Food Safety

What is the risk?

Floodwaters can contaminate food, cookware, utensils, and appliances with harmful bacteria, viruses, or chemicals. Also, power outages can cause cold or frozen foods to warm to a temperature that can make them unsafe to eat.

What foods do I need to discard, and which ones are safe to keep?

Follow the tips below for guidance on deciding on which foods need to be tossed out, and which foods may be salvaged.

- Any food that has directly contacted floodwater **should be discarded**.
- Food in crown-capped bottles, screw top containers, and unprotected flexible packaging **should be discarded**. It is very difficult to open this packaging without spreading the contamination to the food.

Certain food products in sealed packaging, even after contacting floodwater, might be salvageable.

- Only food in sealed, air-tight, and waterproof containers should be kept.
- Sealed metal cans that are not leaking or bulging can be kept.
- Hermetically-sealed packages with protective packaging in good condition can be kept.

If you choose to keep sealed foods that have contacted floodwater, you should wash and sanitize the outer package.

- Wash the sealed exterior with warm water and soap. Then, rinse off all soap.
- Soak the clean cans or packages for 15 minutes in a household bleach solution. Mix the solution by adding **1 cup household bleach per 5 gallons of water**.
- Rinse the cans or packages with clean water.
- Re-inspect the packages. If there are any signs of damage to the package once it is clean, the food **should be discarded**.

My power was out for a while. What about foods that need refrigeration?

Flood events often lead to power outages. Refrigerators and freezers will not operate when the power is out and could be down for hours or days. Foods that require refrigeration for safety include meat, eggs, cheese, dairy products, cut leafy greens, cut melons, leftover prepared foods, and any other food labeled “Keep Refrigerated.” The following tips will help you evaluate the foods in your refrigerator:

- First, if the food in your refrigerator came into contact with floodwater, it **should be discarded** regardless of the temperature of the food.
- Food in a refrigerator should be safe as long as power was not out for longer than 4 hours. **If food has been out of refrigeration (above 40 degrees Fahrenheit) for longer than 4 hours, it should be discarded.**
- You will have to evaluate each food item separately. For example, some hard or processed cheeses, condiments, or sauces may be safe to keep under conditions that would make other foods unsafe. Please call one of our food safety experts if you want more detailed, specific information about a certain food product.

Can I keep frozen foods?

- If the food is still frozen solid and has not contacted floodwater, it should be safe to keep.
- If the food is not frozen solid, follow the time and temperature guidelines in the section above.

Other Considerations:

- When the power is out, avoid opening the door of your fridge or freezer. The unit will keep foods cold, and even frozen, for several hours if the door remains closed.
- When meat warms up or thaws, it often produces juice. **Always discard** any food in the refrigerator that has come into contact with raw meat juices.
- **Never taste food to determine if it is safe to eat!** You can't rely on taste or smell to determine whether bacteria have grown on the food, or if it has been otherwise contaminated.

If you have specific questions about food safety after the flood, please do not hesitate to contact a sanitarian at 258-4755! Our food safety experts are happy to help guide you through the flood recovery period.