

Post-Hurricane Food Safety Frequently Asked Questions

Q: My house got flooded. What should I do with my food?

A: Assess all food to decide what to keep or throw away. Do not eat any food that may have come into contact with flood water. **IF IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT!!!** Do not eat food packed in plastic, paper, cardboard, cloth, and similar containers that have been water damaged. Discard food and beverage containers with screw-caps, snap lids, crimped caps (soda bottles), twist caps, flip tops, and home canned foods, if they have come in contact with flood water. These containers cannot be disinfected. Undamaged, commercially-prepared foods in all-metal cans can be saved if you remove the labels, thoroughly wash the cans, rinse them, and then disinfect them with a sanitizing solution consisting of 1 tablespoon of bleach per gallon of potable water. Finally, re-label containers that had the labels removed, including the expiration date, with a marker.

Q: Is it ok to cook in my kitchen after flooding?

A: Yes, but precautions must be taken to protect food contact surfaces from contaminating your food. When cleaning or disinfecting, wear protective clothing, such as gloves, to avoid skin contact, irritation, or infection. It is important to discard wooden cutting boards, wooden dishes and utensils, plastic utensils, baby bottle nipples, and pacifiers that have come into contact with flood water. These items cannot be safely cleaned. Thoroughly wash metal pans, ceramic dishes, and utensils (including can openers) with soap and water, using hot water if available. Rinse, and then sanitize them by boiling in clean water or immersing them for 15 min. in a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water (or the cleanest, clearest water available). If using a dishwasher, run the dishwasher empty through three complete cycles to flush the water lines and assure that they are cleaned internally before washing equipment and utensils in it.

Thoroughly wash countertops with soap and water, using hot water if available. Rinse, and then sanitize by applying a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water (or the cleanest, clearest water available). Allow to air dry. Make sure to carefully clean corners, cracks and crevices, door handles, and door seals, in rooms that have been affected by flood water.

Q: Our power was out and I'm afraid our food may be unsafe. What do I do?

A: Perishable food such as meat, poultry, seafood, milk, and eggs that are not kept adequately refrigerated or frozen may cause illness if consumed, even when they are thoroughly cooked. If the power in a refrigerator goes out, keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible to maintain 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 approximately 48 hours (24 hours if it is half full) if the door remains closed. Buy dry or block ice to keep the refrigerator as cold as possible if the power is going to be out for a prolonged period of time.

Once the power is on, determine the safety of your food. Check each package of food to determine its safety. You can't rely on appearance or odor. 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 power was out for no more than 4 hours. Keep the door closed as much as possible. Discard any perishable food (such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs or leftovers) that has been above 40° F for two hours or more.

Any food touched by flood water must be discarded.

Q: Should I be concerned about the safety of my water?

A: Hurricanes and flooding can contaminate the public water supply. Water may not be safe to drink. Pay attention to the radio, TV, or other news outlets for information on your local water supply. Announcements should give you updated information and let you know if you need to boil your water to make it safe to drink. Otherwise, use bottled water until your tap water is safe to use and drink.

Q: Where can I find more information?

For more information on food disaster planning and other topics, go to the NJ Department of Health and Senior Services, Food and Drug Safety Program website at:
<http://www.state.nj.us/health/foodanddrugsafety/consumer.shtml> or call 609-826-4935.