

FOOD SAFETY

When a power outage occurs, food safety becomes a concern. Do not panic - in warm weather foods will stay frozen for at least two days in a fully stocked freezer and foods in your refrigerator will stay cold for at least four to six hours. Without heat and depending on the length of time the power is off, you will need to assess the situation using common food safety rules.

Refreezing Foods

As soon as the freezer is operating again, check the frozen foods to see if any have thawed. It is essential to check the foods at this time before they refreeze. If any foods have developed an off-odor, discard them. For foods that have thawed, use the following guidelines for specific foods.

Meat and Poultry (raw):

Refreeze if ice crystals are still present. Fully thawed meats or poultry that are still cold and that have no off-odors or signs of spoilage can be cooked and eaten or refrozen after cooking. Such thawed meats or poultry could be canned (with a pressure cooker) if alternate frozen storage is not available and if the freezer is likely to be inoperable for several days.

Fish and Shellfish:

Refreeze if ice crystals are still present. If fish or shellfish is fully thawed and has been at refrigerator temperature (40°F) no longer than 24 hours, it can be cooked and eaten. Discard thawed seafood that has been held longer than 24 hours.

Cooked meats, Poultry, Fish and Casseroles:

Do not refreeze. If ice crystals are still present, these foods may be eaten. If the food is fully thawed discard it.

Fruits and Vegetables:

Refreeze if ice crystals are still present. If fully thawed, but still cold, check for off-odors. Fruits ferment quickly and while they will not be unsafe, the flavor will be affected. They may be used for jams, jellies and other cooked purposes.

Vegetables undergo flavor changes rapidly and may develop a sour odor. Fully thawed vegetables that do not look or smell unusual can be cooked and then refrozen.

Bakery Products: These foods can be safely refrozen, but may be drier.

Ice Cream, Other frozen desserts: Discard if thawed.

Refreeze foods as quickly as possible by setting the freezer to its coldest temperature. Re-label all foods so you know that they have been refrozen and try to use them within two or three months. While foods refrozen according to the guidelines will be safe to eat, they will be lower in quality because of loss of color, flavor, texture and some nutrients.

Refrigerator

Foods in a refrigerator will stay cold at least four to six hours after a power failure. The length of time depends on how warm the surrounding area is. Some foods stored in the refrigerator can be safely held at room temperature for a few days. These include salad dressings, catsup, mustard, barbeque sauces, jams and jellies, margarine, butter, pickles, fruits and vegetables.

Odor Problems

If food has been allowed to spoil in a refrigerator, a strong odor may be difficult to remove. After cleaning with a gentle cleaning solution and warm water, or bleach solution (1 teaspoon household chlorine bleach per quart of water), leave the unit unplugged with the door open for a day or two to air out. If the odor still remains, try one or more of the following methods.

- Place trays of freshly ground coffee, clean cat litter, baking soda or activated charcoal on the shelves of the refrigerator or freezer. Run the refrigerator or freezer empty for two or three days.
- Pack each refrigerator or freezer shelf with crumpled newspaper. Set a cup of water on the top shelf or sprinkle the newspaper with water. Allow the refrigerator or freezer to run for about five or six days. This method takes longer, but can be effective in removing strong odors.
- Try using commercial cleaning products made especially for removing refrigerator and freezer odors. These products may be available at hardware, grocery, discount and variety stores.
- If odor has seeped into the insulation, spray disinfectant around hinges and locks, and into any other openings. If the odor fails to go away, the insulation may need to be replaced.

For more information contact the UW Extension Office in your county.