

# Keeping Food Safe during an Emergency

Safe food handling is always important, and especially so in emergency situations. By taking steps before, during and after an emergency, you can help protect your family from foodborne illnesses. Here are some practical tips for storing, handling and preparing food in an emergency.

## Before an emergency:

- Check the temperature of your fridge and freezer: are they cold enough? Refrigerators should be set at or below 4°C (40°F). Use a refrigerator thermometer to check the temperature. Freezers should be set at or below -18°C (0°F). Use a freezer thermometer to check the temperature.
- Have a cooler and ice ready ahead of time to keep refrigerated food cold in case the power is out for more than four hours.
- Always have items on hand that do not require refrigeration such as canned goods and water.
- Replace these emergency storage food items periodically.
- Make sure you have ready-to-use baby formula and pet food available, if needed.
- Ensure you have a hand-held can opener to use during an emergency.

## During an emergency

- Listen to local authorities to determine if tap water is safe to use. If the water is not safe to use, follow instructions to use bottled water, or to boil or disinfect water for cooking, cleaning and bathing.
- Do not use contaminated water to: brush your teeth, make baby formula, make ice, wash or prepare food, wash dishes or wash hands.
- Do not eat any food that may have come into contact with: chemicals, animal waste, floodwater, snow or ice, soil or dirt.
- Check the condition of stored food and throw away any containers that have been damaged or are past their “best before” dates. Can or container damage includes crushing, dents, rust, holes, leakage and swelling.
- Food containers that are not waterproof and could have come into contact with floodwater should be thrown away. These include containers with pull tops, screw-caps and snap lids. If baby formula containers, cardboard juice containers, home-canned foods and milk containers have come into contact with floodwater or hazardous material, they should be thrown away.

## Food in your refrigerator:

- Keep the refrigerator door closed to maintain the temperature inside. Without power, the refrigerator section will keep foods cool for 4-6 hours — if the door is kept closed.
- If possible, add bags of ice to the refrigerator to keep temperatures cooler for a longer period.
- When in doubt, throw it out! If you are not sure whether an item is spoiled, play it safe and throw it out. Eating unsafe foods may cause food-borne illness.
- Throw out perishable foods such as meat, fish, poultry, eggs and leftovers that have been at temperatures above 4°C for more than two hours.
- Throw out any food that is off-colour or has an off odor as soon as possible.
- Contact your doctor or pharmacist for information about proper storage of medication that requires refrigeration, such as insulin.
- Do not place frozen food outside, even in winter. The sun’s rays could thaw frozen food even when the outdoor temperature is very cold, and animals could contaminate food. If you know a power failure will last for a long period of time, take food to a friend nearby with power.

#### Food in your freezer:

- Keep the freezer door closed to maintain the temperature inside. Without power, an upright or chest freezer that is completely full will keep food frozen for about two days. A half-full freezer will keep food frozen for one day. Avoid opening and closing the freezer to check the food inside.
- If possible, add bags of ice to the freezer to help to keep the temperatures cooler for a longer period of time.
- If the power is going to be off for an extended period of time, consider taking food to a freezer belonging to a friend or neighbour – if they have power!
- Partial thawing and refreezing may reduce the quality of some food, but the food will remain safe to eat.

#### **After an emergency**

The only foods that are entirely safe to eat after an emergency are undamaged, commercially prepared foods in sealed, unopened, airtight, waterproof cans, jars or pouches. Even before using these, carefully inspect, clean and disinfect them by:

- Removing the labels on cans, jars or pouches
- Cleaning cans, jars or pouches by washing them for two minutes with a mild bleach solution of one teaspoon bleach to three cups of water
- Air-dry all cleaned food cans, jars and pouches to prevent potential contamination when the containers are opened
- Re-label containers with a permanent marker and clearly label the “best before” date and any other important information
- Properly sanitize all food preparation equipment, surfaces, dishes and utensils with a mild bleach solution. It is important to allow equipment, surfaces, dishes and utensils to air dry thoroughly before using or storing. Do not put one wet cutting board on top of another -- bacteria can multiply in trapped water.

## **REFRIGERATOR**

<b>Food Categories</b>	<b>Specific Foods</b>	<b>Held above 40 °F for over 2 hours</b>	
<b>MEAT, POULTRY, SEAFOOD</b>	Raw or leftover cooked meat, poultry, fish, or seafood; soy meat substitutes	Discard	
	Thawing meat or poultry	Discard	
	Salads: Meat, tuna, shrimp, chicken, or egg salad	Discard	
	Gravy, stuffing, broth	Discard	
	Lunchmeats, hot dogs, bacon, sausage, dried beef	Discard	
	Pizza – with any topping	Discard	
	Canned hams labeled "Keep Refrigerated"	Discard	
	Canned meats and fish, opened	Discard	
	Casseroles, soups, stews	Discard	
	<b>CHEESE</b>	Soft Cheeses: blue/bleu, Roquefort, Brie, Camembert, cottage, cream, Edam, Monterey Jack, ricotta, mozzarella, Muenster, Neufchatel, queso blanco, queso fresco	Discard
Hard Cheeses: Cheddar, Colby, Swiss, Parmesan, provolone, Romano		Safe	
Processed Cheeses		Safe	
Shredded Cheeses		Discard	
Low-fat Cheeses		Discard	
<b>DAIRY</b>	Grated Parmesan, Romano, or combination (in can or jar)	Safe	
	Milk, cream, sour cream, buttermilk, evaporated milk, yogurt, eggnog, soy milk	Discard	
	Butter, margarine	Safe	
<b>EGGS</b>	Baby formula, opened	Discard	
	Fresh eggs, hard-cooked in shell, egg dishes, egg products	Discard	
<b>FRUITS</b>	Custards and puddings, quiche	Discard	
	Fresh fruits, cut	Discard	
	Fruit juices, opened	Safe	
	Canned fruits, opened	Safe	
<b>SAUCES, SPREADS, JAMS</b>	Fresh fruits, coconut, raisins, dried fruits, candied fruits, dates	Safe	
	Opened mayonnaise, tartar sauce, horseradish	Discard if above 50 °F for over 8 hrs.	
	Peanut butter	Safe	
	Jelly, relish, taco sauce, mustard, catsup, olives, pickles	Safe	
	Worcestershire, soy, barbecue, hoisin sauces	Safe	
	Fish sauces, oyster sauce	Discard	
	Opened vinegar-based dressings	Safe	
	Opened creamy-based dressings	Discard	
	Spaghetti sauce, opened jar	Discard	
	<b>BREAD, CAKES, COOKIES, PASTA, GRAINS</b>	Bread, rolls, cakes, muffins, quick breads, tortillas	Safe
Refrigerator biscuits, rolls, cookie dough		Discard	
Cooked pasta, rice, potatoes		Discard	
Pasta salads with mayonnaise or vinaigrette		Discard	
Fresh pasta		Discard	
Cheesecake		Discard	
Breakfast foods –waffles, pancakes, bagels		Safe	
<b>PIES, PASTRY</b>		Pastries, cream filled	Discard
		Pies – custard, cheese filled, or chiffon; quiche	Discard
		Pies, fruit	Safe
<b>VEGETABLES</b>	Fresh mushrooms, herbs, spices	Safe	
	Greens, pre-cut, pre-washed, packaged	Discard	
	Vegetables, raw	Safe	
	Vegetables, cooked; tofu	Discard	
	Vegetable juice, opened	Discard	
	Baked potatoes	Discard	
	Commercial garlic in oil	Discard	
	Potato salad	Discard	
Casseroles, soups, stews	Discard		

## **FREEZER**

<b>Food Categories</b>	<b>Specific Foods</b>	<b>Still contains ice crystals and feels as cold as if refrigerated</b>	<b>Thawed and held above 40 °F for over 2 hours</b>
<b>MEAT, POULTRY, SEAFOOD</b>	Beef, veal, lamb, pork, and ground meats	Refreeze	Discard
	Poultry and ground poultry	Refreeze	Discard
	Variety meats (liver, kidney, heart, chitterlings)	Refreeze	Discard
	Casseroles, stews, soups	Refreeze	Discard
	Fish, shellfish, breaded seafood products	Refreeze. However, there will be some texture and flavor loss.	Discard
<b>DAIRY</b>	Milk	Refreeze. May lose some texture.	Discard
	Eggs (out of shell) and egg products	Refreeze	Discard
	Ice cream, frozen yogurt	Discard	Discard
	Cheese (soft and semi-soft)	Refreeze. May lose some texture.	Discard
	Hard cheeses	Refreeze	Refreeze
	Shredded cheeses	Refreeze	Discard
	Casseroles containing milk, cream, eggs, soft cheeses	Refreeze	Discard
<b>FRUITS</b>	Cheesecake	Refreeze	Discard
	Juices	Refreeze	Refreeze. Discard if mold, yeasty smell, or sliminess develops.
<b>VEGETABLES</b>	Home or commercially packaged	Refreeze. Will change texture and flavor.	Refreeze. Discard if mold, yeasty smell, or sliminess develops.
	Juices	Refreeze	Discard after held above 40 °F for 6 hours.
<b>BREADS, PASTRIES</b>	Home or commercially packaged or blanched	Refreeze. May suffer texture and flavor loss.	Discard after held above 40 °F for 6 hours.
	Breads, rolls, muffins, cakes (without custard fillings)	Refreeze	Refreeze
	Cakes, pies, pastries with custard or cheese filling	Refreeze	Discard
	Pie crusts, commercial and homemade bread dough	Refreeze. Some quality loss may occur.	Refreeze. Quality loss is considerable.
<b>OTHER</b>	Casseroles – pasta, rice based	Refreeze	Discard
	Flour, cornmeal, nuts	Refreeze	Refreeze
	Breakfast items –waffles, pancakes, bagels	Refreeze	Refreeze
	Frozen meal, entree, specialty items (pizza, sausage and biscuit, meat pie, convenience foods)	Refreeze	Discard



**Niagara Region Public Health & Emergency Services 905-688-8248, ext. 7590 or toll free**

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