



Safe Food and Flooding

Have you experienced flooding and wondered what to do with food affected by the flood?

With the current threats of serious flooding and power outages, it is important to remember that many food products exposed to flood water or that can't be properly refrigerated due to power outages may be unsafe and should be discarded.

"I know it may seem wasteful, but improperly refrigerated foods or those exposed to flood water can be a source of serious food-borne illnesses," said Christine Pasley, University of Wyoming Extension Educator, nutrition and food safety. "It's better to play it safe than to risk making you and your family sick."

U.S. Food and Drug Administration guidelines call for disposing of food products exposed to flood waters because they can contain food-borne pathogens, sewage, petroleum products and other contaminants.

"That includes home-canned foods, foods like juices in cardboard packaging, and containers with screw caps, snap lids, pull tops and crimped caps," Pasley said. "They simply cannot be properly cleaned and sanitized."

Pasley added that even crops in the field and harvested fresh fruits and vegetables should not be consumed.

"They can't be properly cleaned and according to the FDA guidelines they are not fit for human consumption and should not enter the food chain," she said.

Pasley said that commercially prepared foods in unopened metal cans showing no signs of damage, severe denting or extensive rusting should be properly cleaned and sanitized before the contents are consumed.

Proper sanitation involves removing labels if possible that can harbor dirt, washing the cans thoroughly in soap and hot water and rinsing them thoroughly with water suitable for drinking. The cans should either be immersed in clean water and brought to a boil for 10 minutes, or immersed in a freshly made solution of 1 tablespoon unscented liquid bleach per gallon of drinking water and soaked for 15 minutes. Allow cans to air dry for at least an hour before being stored or opened.

Keeping food safe during a power outage poses some different challenges. “Perishable foods should not be stored at temperatures above 40 degrees F. for more than two hours,” said Pasley. “Generally, foods that have been stored above 40 degrees should be discarded, but there are some exceptions.”

"Normally refrigerated foods that can be safely kept at temperatures above 40 degrees include hard cheeses, butter and margarine, fresh fruits and fruit juice," she said. "Condiments including ketchup, mustard, olives and pickles are on the list too, along with jams, jellies and peanut butter."

With frozen foods, Pasley said that if they still contain ice crystals they can be safely refrozen. Thawed fruits, fruit juices and fruit pies will be safe to eat unless they show signs of spoilage or have been contaminated by juices from thawing meats. All other thawed foods should be discarded.

She recommended that during a power outage refrigerator and freezer doors be kept closed as much as possible to keep foods cold.

“If you can get block ice or dry ice during an extended outage you can extend our appliances’ ability to keep food cold,” Pasley said. “Put dry ice on a piece of cardboard to separate it from the food, and allow for two to three pounds of dry ice per cubic foot of freezer space.”

Pasley offers the following safety tips for specific foods:

- Meat, poultry and seafood, including hot dogs and lunchmeats, should be discarded if they have been stored above 40° F for more than two hours. Frozen meats that have intact ice crystals and an internal temperature below 40° F may be refrozen. Specialty meats such as liver and heart should never be refrozen.
- Dairy products including milk, cream, soft cheeses and yogurt should be discarded if held above 40° F for more than two hours. The same goes for mayonnaise.
- Hard cheeses, butter and margarine that are well packaged should remain safe at temperatures above 40° F, but discard if there are signs of mold or spoilage. Ketchup, mustard, olives, pickles, jams, jellies and peanut butter also can be stored safely without refrigeration.
- Fresh eggs should be discarded if held above 40° F for more than two hours.
- Fresh fruits and vegetables can be safely stored without refrigeration, but should be discarded if there are signs of mold or spoilage.

- Cooked food items and leftovers including cooked pasta, stews, casseroles, soups, potatoes, custards and puddings should be discarded if held above 40° F for more than two hours.

For more information on food and water safety during floods and power outages, contact your local county Extension office; the American Red Cross; the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); or the Food and Drug Administration at <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/fsdisas.html>.

Sources:

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