

Disaster Relief

Facts About Food & Floods

Is Food Safe To Eat?

Foods that have come in contact with flood waters or water from broken pipes can be dangerous to use. This information sheet helps you judge the safety of your foods after a flood or power outage.

You can save many canned foods if they are not dented or damaged. Follow the cleaning methods recommended in this information sheet. Throw away any pantry-type foods or fresh foods that came in direct contact with flood water. Flood water may carry silt, raw sewage, oil, or chemical wastes. Refrigerator/freezer foods need to be thrown out if your power were out for the extended period of time.

Water for Drinking, Cooking, or Cleaning

After a flood, consider all water unsafe! Listen for public announcements on the safety of your water supply before using any water for drinking, cooking, or cleaning. If you must use water from your faucet, bring water to a rolling boil for 1 minute (3 to 5 minutes if you live in a high altitude area). Boiling water makes water safe from bacterial, viral, and parasitic diseases. Contact your health department for specific recommendations if there has been a chemical contamination of your water.

Discard all of these:

- Fresh produce
- All glass/jarred foods, including “never opened” jars, such as mayonnaise and salad dressing. Containers with cork-lined, waxed cardboard, pop tops, peel-off tops, or paraffin (waxed) seals are nearly impossible to clean around the lid/opening.

- All food in cardboard boxes, such as juice boxes, paper, foil, cellophane, cloth, or any other kind of flexible container.
- Canned goods that are dented (on lids or seams), leaking, or bulging.
- Canned goods that are rusted unless you can easily remove the rust by light rubbing.
- Home canned foods
- Spices, seasonings, and extracts
- Opened containers and packages of any kind.
- Flour, sugar, grains, pasta, coffee, and other staples stored in canisters.

Consumer Tips

- Always keep cold foods cold (34 to 40 °F); hot foods hot (140 to 165 °F).
- Never keep perishable foods at room temperature for any longer than 2 hours, including time to prepare, serve, and eat.
- Keep everything clean: hands, utensils, counters, cutting boards, and sink.

Save canned goods that are not bulging, leaking, or dented. **Be thoroughly clean and sanitize all cans.**

Clean Canned Foods

1. Mark contents on the can with a permanent ink pen.
2. Remove paper labels, since as they can harbor dangerous bacteria.
3. Wash cans in a strong detergent solution with a scrub brush. Carefully clean areas around lids and seams.
4. Soak cans in a solution of two tea spoons of chlorine bleach per quart of room temperature water for 15 minutes.
5. Air dry cans before opening.

Throw away any cans that may have come in contact with industrial or septic waste. I you are unsure about the safety of any food, throw it out!

Power Outage

Food in a refrigerator is generally safe if the power were out for less than 2 or 3 hours. Foods in the freezer last longer. Food in a full, free-standing freezer is safe for about 2 days, a half-full freezer for about 1 day. It is safe to refreeze thawed foods that still contain ice crystals.

Do not rely on the appearance or odor of a food to determine if it is safe. Bacteria that cause foodborne illness can multiply rapidly on perishable foods that have been at room temperature for more than 2 hours.

Discard the following perishable foods if kept above refrigerator temperature (40 °F) for more than 2 hours:

- Raw or cooked meat, poultry or seafood
- Milk/cream, yogurt, soft cheese
- Cooked pasta, pasta salads
- Fresh eggs, egg substitutes
- Meat or cheese-topped pizza, luncheon meats
- Casseroles, stew or soups
- Mayonnaise, tartar sauce, and creamy dressings
- Refrigerated cookie doughs
- Cream-filled pastries

The foods listed below are generally safe without refrigeration for a few days. However, double check each food and discard the food if it has signs of mold or has an unusual odor or look. These foods spoil and lose quality much faster at warmer temperatures.

- Butter, margarine
- Fresh fruits and vegetables
- Dried fruits
- Opened jars or peanut butter, jelly, relish, taco sauce, barbecue sauce, ketchup, mustard, olives, oil-based salad dressings
- Fruit juices
- Hard or processed cheeses

Clean The Kitchen

Remember to clean and sanitize any kitchen area/items that have come in contact with flood waters.

- Scrub kitchen counters, pantry shelves, refrigerators, and stoves with warm, soapy water. Rinse and wipe with a solution of 2 teaspoons of chlorine bleach to 1 quart of water, using a clean cloth.
- Sanitize dishes and glassware the same way. To disinfect metal pans and utensils, boil them in water for 10 minutes.
- Discard wooden spoons, wooden cutting boards, plastic utensils, and baby bottle nipples, and pacifiers. These items may absorb or hide bacteria, making them difficult to clean and sanitize.
- Wash all kitchen linens in detergent and hot water. Use chlorine bleach to sanitize the linens, following directions on the bleach container.

For more information about the safe handling of food, contact USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline toll-free at 1-800-535-4555 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time, Monday through Friday 1-888-674-6854 or by email at mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov or contact your Mississippi State University Extension office.

Revised by Brent Fountain, PhD, RD, LD, Extension Human Nutrition Specialist, from an earlier publication developed by the Food Marketing Institute, 800 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006 in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service Extension Service, 14th Street and Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250.

Discrimination based upon race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status is a violation of federal and state law and MSU policy and will not be tolerated. Discrimination based upon sexual orientation or group affiliation is a violation of MSU policy and will not be tolerated.

Information Sheet 1840

Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. MELISSA J. MIXON, Interim Director