

Food safety in emergencies

Emergencies can include flood, fire, power cut or contamination of food or water supplies.

Be prepared

Plan ahead. Where possible prepare by having food on hand that doesn't need refrigeration or heating. Foods with a long shelf life such as long life milk, bottled water and canned goods should be part of an emergency food supply.

If needed ensure there will be enough ready-to-use formula for infants and food for pets. If items have a use-by date, use before the date expires. Keep a manual can opener ready.

In areas that could be affected by a flood, plan to store food well above floodwater levels. Have eskies with ice bricks or gel packs to keep food cold if the power will be out.

Have drinking-quality water, detergent, chlorine bleach and alcohol-based hand sanitiser for cleaning.

Remember

The golden rules of food safety are:

- keep it cold,
- keep it clean,
- keep it hot, and
- check the label.

Basic hygiene

Keep it clean! It's critical to practice basic hygiene. Wash and dry hands thoroughly with soap using clean, drinking-quality water before preparing food or eating, after toilet use, after clean-up activities and after handling articles that might be contaminated with chemicals, floodwater or sewage. Use alcohol-based hand sanitiser to wash hands if the supply of drinking-quality water is limited.

After a flood or spill

Floodwater can be contaminated with sewage, agricultural and industrial waste, and other substances that can cause illness. There is a danger that any food, surfaces and cooking utensils that have come into contact with floodwater might be contaminated.

Spills and sewage discharges can also contaminate water supplies and food gardens.

Throw out food that might not be safe to eat

- Throw out food that has come into contact with floodwater or has an unusual odour, colour or texture. Do not taste or cook it.

- Check canned food and throw out any cans that are dented, swollen or damaged. Some cans might be salvageable. For cans that appear useable:
 - remove the label and thoroughly wash the outside of the can with drinking-quality water
 - sanitise the can in bleach for 1 minute, then rinse in drinking-quality water
 - re-label the can with a waterproof pen
- Vegetable gardens can take a month to become suitable after flood or sewage discharge. Discard all leafy green produce. After one month, wash other vegetables then sanitise in a weak bleach solution of 1 tablespoon of bleach to 2 litres of water. Then rinse in drinking-quality water, peel and use. Monitor announcements and consult local authorities after other sorts of contamination.

If in doubt, throw it out.

Clean and sanitise surfaces and food utensils

Follow these steps:

1. Carefully check dishes, pots, pans, cutlery and kitchen equipment that might have been in contact with floodwater. Throw away damaged or cracked items, items made from porous material such as wood, plastic or rubber including wooden chopping boards as they cannot be adequately sanitised.
2. Wash utensils and surfaces in hot, soapy, drinking-quality water. Take apart and clean the non-electrical pieces of any kitchen equipment that can be safely taken apart and then rinse in clean, hot water.
3. Sanitise silverware, metal utensils, pots, pans and kitchen equipment in pieces by boiling in water for 10 minutes. Sanitise dishes by immersing glass, porcelain, china and enamel-ware for 10 minutes in a disinfecting solution of 1 tablespoon of chlorine bleach per 2 litres of hot water. Then rinse. Clean cupboards and counters with hot soapy water then rinse with a chlorine bleach solution before storing dishes or food.
4. Air dry items because towels might have been splashed with contaminated water.

Commercial and most domestic dishwashers are capable of sanitising all eating and cooking utensils as part of their normal cycle.

Water for drinking

In an emergency such as a flood or contamination event, tap water and private water supplies such as from tanks, wells and bores sometimes might not be safe to drink and use for cooking and cleaning.

Monitor public announcements and those from the local water supplier to know if tap water is safe to use. Private water supplies should be tested before using again. Contact your council.

If the water is unsafe:

- use only bottled, boiled or treated water—in that order of preference—for drinking, cooking or preparing food, washing utensils and surfaces, brushing teeth, hand washing, making ice, and bathing.
- only treat contaminated water if no drinking-quality water can be obtained
 - filter cloudy water through a clean cloth or allow it to settle, then pour off the clear water for boiling. Boil the water vigorously for 1 minute then leave it to cool and store in a clean, covered container. Boiling will ensure water safe from most types of harmful bugs but will not remove chemical contaminants.
 - only if water cannot be boiled, treat it with chlorine or iodine tablets. Follow the directions that come with the tablets. This might not kill all bugs and won't remove chemical contaminants.

Thoroughly clean any containers used to store water with hot soapy drinking-quality water, then rinse with a bleach solution before use.

After a fire

One of the dangers of a fire can be toxic fumes from burning materials. Chemicals used to fight the fire can also contain toxic materials. The heat from a fire can cause bacteria in food to multiply and grow:

- throw out any food that has been near a fire, including food in cans and jars even if it appears OK.
- any raw food, or food in packaging such as cardboard, plastic wrap, screw-topped jars and bottles should also be thrown out.
- throw out food from a refrigerator as the refrigerator seal isn't airtight, fumes can get inside.
- wash cooking utensils exposed to fire-fighting chemicals in soapy hot water, then sanitise in 1 tablespoon of chlorine bleach per 2 litres of hot water and rinse.

After a power failure

It is useful to make a note of the time the power failed.

Keep it cold! If the power supply is out for more than 4 hours, food in fridges can spoil. Keep the refrigerator door closed as much as possible. A closed refrigerator should keep food cold for 4 hours. If food that's meant to be in the fridge is allowed to warm for 2 hours or more, avoid eating it.

Freezers will usually not defrost and allow food to spoil for at least 24 hours, provided the door has been kept shut. If frozen foods have thawed, they should not be refrozen but should be kept cold and eaten as soon as possible.

Keep it hot! Throw out food that was being cooked when the power failed if cooking cannot be completed properly within 2 hours. If food is already properly cooked, eat it within 2 hours or throw it out.

Food businesses

Businesses must not sell food that is unsafe or unsuitable.

Use only drinking-quality (potable) water for activities on food premises.

Salvaging canned food for resale is not recommended for food businesses.

Food businesses must not re-label packaged foods unless permission is obtained from the Authority.

Ensure that discarded food cannot be collected by consumers. Councils may offer special collection.

Food businesses can contact their local council for assistance with reopening their business.

More information

For more information see the EmergencyNSW website, at www.emergency.nsw.gov.au or call the State Emergency Service (SES) on 13 25 00.