

FOOD SAFETY IN EMERGENCIES

This factsheet will help you make the right decisions to keep your food safe in emergencies such as flood, bushfire, severe weather and power outage

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. Keep a manual can opener ready.

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.

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

Have a supply of drinking quality water, detergent, chlorine bleach and alcohol-based hand sanitiser available.

Remember the golden rules of food safety

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

Basic hygiene

Keep it clean! It's critical to practise basic hygiene. Wash 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 clean hands if the supply of drinking quality water is limited.

After a flood

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

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.

Clean and sanitise food utensils, food contact surfaces and other surfaces

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 cleaned and 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 drinking quality, 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 enamelware for 10 minutes in a sanitising solution (200ppm) made by adding 25mL of 4% non-fragranced household chlorine bleach to 5L of cold water. Then rinse with drinking

quality water. Clean cupboards and counters with hot soapy water then sanitise with a 200ppm 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. Check instructions for domestic dishwashers to ensure the appropriate cycle is used.

Water for drinking

In an emergency such as a flood, tap water and private water supplies such as from tanks, wells and bores might not be safe to drink or 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 local council.

If the water is unsafe:

- use only bottled, boiled or treated water for drinking, making ice, cooking or preparing food, washing utensils or contact surfaces, as well as handwashing, brushing teeth 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 10 minutes then leave it to cool and store in a clean and sanitised covered container. Boiling will ensure water is safe from most types of harmful microorganisms but will not remove chemical contaminants
- 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 microorganisms and won't remove chemical contaminants.

Thoroughly clean and sanitise any containers used to store water.

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.

It is best to throw out any food that has been near a fire, including food in cans and jars even if it appears okay. Any raw food, or food in packaging such as cardboard, plastic wrap, screw topped jars and bottles should also be thrown out.

As the refrigerator seal isn't airtight, fumes can get inside. Throw out food from a refrigerator.

Wash cooking utensils exposed to fire-fighting chemicals in soapy hot water, then sanitise with a sanitising solution (200ppm) made by adding 25mL of 4% household unfragranced chlorine bleach to 5L of cold water. Rinse with drinking quality water.

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 the fridge can spoil. Keep the refrigerator door closed as much as possible. A closed refrigerator should keep food cold for 4 hours. If food stored in the fridge has been at temperatures between 5°C and 60° for a total of:

- less than 2 hours – refrigerate at or below 5°C, or use immediately
- longer than 2 hours but less than 4 hours – use immediately
- 4 hours or longer – throw out.

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, do not re-freeze them. Keep thawed food cold (at 5°C or less) and eat as soon as possible and as per the manufacturer's instructions.

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

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 NSW Food 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

- Visit the State Emergency Services (SES) website at: www.emergency.nsw.gov.au, or phone the SES on 13 25 00.
- Visit the Food Authority's website at: www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/consumer/keeping-food-safe/flood-fire-power-cut-emergencies
- Email the helpline at food.contact@dpi.nsw.gov.au
- Phone the helpline on 1300 552 406

About the NSW Food Authority: The NSW Food Authority is the government organisation that helps ensure NSW food is safe and correctly labelled. It works with consumers, industry and other government organisations to minimise food poisoning by providing information about and regulating the safe production, storage, transport, promotion and preparation of food.

Note: This information is a general summary and cannot cover all situations. Food businesses are required to comply with all of the provisions of the Food Standards Code and the *Food Act 2003* (NSW).