

WHEN THE POWER FAILS

Winter power outages can be an expensive inconvenience when you have food in your freezer. The safety of each type of frozen food must be evaluated when the outage ends. It's wise to have both a refrigerator and a freezer thermometer to help make these decisions.

In a well-filled freezer, food will probably stay frozen for 15-20 hours if the door is kept closed. If power is likely to be out longer than that, consider moving your food to another location that isn't experiencing the outage. If that isn't possible, dry ice could be used to keep the temperature cold.

If there are piles of snow outside, you can use them for temporary storage. Line a plastic garbage can with a clean garbage bag. Put the frozen food in the can, twist and tie the bag and put the lid on tightly. Bury the can in snow.

Those who wait for the end of the outage will need to evaluate the condition of the food when the power is restored. Before food refreezes, examine packages for signs of thawing. Packages on the outer edges of the freezer are more likely to have thawed, than those surrounded in the middle.

If there are ice crystals in a food, it is safe to refreeze it immediately. If a food has completely thawed, decisions depend on its composition and potential for bacterial growth. Cooked foods can be a food safety hazard if held at room temperature higher than 40 degrees (recommended refrigerator temperature) for longer than 2 to 3 hours. If completely thawed; cooked meat, poultry, pot pies, casseroles, stews, and chili should be discarded because of the potential for bacterial growth is high. Cooked (or blanched) vegetables should also be discarded.

Uncooked meat and poultry is less risky. If the temperature has not risen above 40° F, raw meat and poultry may be refrozen. Label the packages with a "cook thoroughly" reminder.

After complete thawing, raw fruits and fruit juices may start to ferment. This will result in a flavor change that may be undesirable. Examine packages for off-odors before refreezing.

If freezer jams show signs of molding or fermentation, they should be discarded.

Nuts, breads, plain cakes, and cookies may be refrozen safely. They may become drier as a result.

Keep an up-to-date inventory of freezer contents. This will save time as you make decisions about salvaging the freezer contents.