



Food Safety Features

From USDA'S Meat and Poultry Hotline

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SAVING FOOD DURING WINTER STORMS

DON'T BE LEFT OUT IN THE COLD!

There's an old classic song that goes, "Baby, It's Cold Outside." Well, is it safe to keep meat, poultry and other perishable foods outside if the temperature is as cold as the refrigerator or freezer?

When that bitter cold snap or blizzard comes this winter, many people will call USDA's toll-free Meat and Poultry Hotline about whether perishable foods can be kept outside when the power fails.

"Basically, the answer is NO!," says Susan Conley, Director of the Hotline. "It is potentially dangerous and has too many variables. Besides there are other things you can do to protect your foods indoors."

First, it is too dangerous to keep food outside because if it is exposed to the sun's rays, there could be melting of frozen foods. Refrigerated foods may become too warm, and warming them may allow foodborne bacteria to grow.

"Keep in mind that the outside temperature could vary hour by hour," says Conley. "Also, that outside temperature is not going to be satisfactory to protect both refrigerated and frozen foods at the same time."

For example, if the outside temperature is 25 degrees F, that is really too cold for refrigerated foods and much too warm for frozen foods.

"Secondly, even if you have an ideal outside temperature for refrigerated or frozen foods," says Conley, "you will be exposing your perishable items to unsanitary conditions and to animals that may stray by."

Conley explains that there are many calls from consumers each year about whether food that was stored outside can be saved because a wild animal or dog got into it. The answer, of course, is a flat-out NO! Animals are not clean and may harbor disease.

So what should someone do when there is a power failure and the wind is howling and the snow is falling at an inch or more an hour?

"Many times, food can be protected and saved," says Conley. "If the power failure is not a lengthy

one, several hours for example, refrigerated food will stay cold if the refrigerator door is kept closed. Don't check on how cold the food is. Every time you open the door, you let out precious cold air."

That same rule applies to the freezer door as well. Most freezers that are part of a refrigerator-freezer combination will keep food frozen for up to a day - IF the door stays closed.

A separate free-standing chest or upright freezer will keep food frozen solid for two days, if it is fully loaded. A half-full freezer will still keep food frozen for a day, especially if the food has been grouped together.

What if the power outage lasts for more than a few hours or a day? "You may lose the refrigerated food," says Conley, "but hopefully you can still save the frozen items." Conley advises if possible to "buy some dry ice from a local ice supplier."

Dry ice, however, is not recommended for the refrigerator; instead, try to buy some block ice from a local ice company, or bags of ice at a convenience store or grocery. Also, in extreme conditions, the local power company may set up distribution points for dry or block ice. Check ahead about where to buy dry or block ice.

A word of warning: handle dry ice very carefully. Because of its extremely low temperature, do not handle with bare hands; use tongs or heavy gloves. And always handle in a well-ventilated area.

"You may also be able to buy freezer gels - known as 'blue ice' - at the local supermarket and use them in the refrigerator portion," Conley advises. "These should be stored in the freezer section until you need them for the refrigerator or freezer.

How can you tell if perishable items should be discarded? "Food still containing ice crystals or that feel cold to the touch can be refrozen," says Conley.

"Discard any thawed food that has risen to room temperature. Never taste suspect food. Some foods may look and smell fine, but still be dangerous because bacteria that cause foodborne illness may be present."

But the general rule is this: When in doubt, throw it out!

For more information call USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-800-535-4555. In the Washington, D. C area call (202) 720-3333. Both numbers are TDD-accessible. Hours are 10 am to 4 pm, Eastern Time, Monday-Friday. At other times, helpful and timely recorded messages are available through a "menu" system which you can access if you have a touch-tone phone.