

Power Out? A Guide to Refrigerator Safety When You Don't Have Electricity

Storms have been plentiful lately causing the power to go out and stay out for hours. Have you been one of them? If not you will be sooner or later so let's go through a refresher course as to what is good to do and what it not good to do to keep your foods safe. Here is what you should know, in case your fridge and freezer lose their juice.

Refrigerator Safety: The Essentials

Here are the basics of fridge safety, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: If the power is out for less than 2 hours, then the food in your refrigerator and freezer will be safe to consume. While the power is out, keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible to keep food cold for longer.

If the power is out for longer than 2 hours, follow the guidelines below:

- For the Freezer section: A freezer that is half full will hold food safely for up to 24 hours. A full freezer will hold food safely for 48 hours. Do not open the freezer door if you can avoid it.
- For the Refrigerated section: Pack milk, other dairy products, meat, fish, eggs, gravy, and spoilable leftovers into a cooler surrounded by ice. Inexpensive Styrofoam coolers are fine for this purpose.
- Use a food thermometer to check the temperature of your food right before you cook or eat it. Throw away any food that has a temperature of more than 40 degrees Fahrenheit.
- The magic number there? **2 hours**. Yep, after two hours, either transfer the stuff in your fridge to a cooler or a working refrigerator. Don't mess with spoiled food; it's not worth getting sick.

What to Throw Away and What to Keep

OK, so your fridge has been without power and above 40°F for more than 2 hours. Is anything safe to keep?

Yes, some condiments and foods are OK to keep, although meat and most dairy need to go.

Here's a very helpful and handy list from FoodSafety.gov on what to keep and what to toss: http://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/charts/refridg_food.html

Solving Odor Problems in Your Refrigerator or Freezer

If food has been allowed to spoil in a refrigerator or freezer, the strong odors associated with food spoilage may be extremely difficult to remove.

The first step is to clean the appliance with a gentle household cleaning solution and water. Use a bleach solution (one tablespoon chlorine bleach per gallon of water) to rinse inside surfaces. While the unit is unplugged, leave the door open for a day or two to air it out. Spray disinfectant around hinges and locks and into any openings.

If the odor remains, try one of the following methods:

- Place trays of activated charcoal, clean kitty litter or baking soda on the shelves of the refrigerator or freezer. Run the appliance empty for 2 or 3 days. Activated charcoal can be purchased from stores that sell aquarium and terrarium supplies.
- Place freshly ground coffee on cookie sheets in the refrigerator or freezer and close the door. Again, run the appliance empty for 2 or 3 days. A slight coffee odor may remain, but will disappear after washing and rinsing.
- Pack each refrigerator or freezer shelf with crumpled newspaper. Set a cup of water on the top shelf or sprinkle the newspaper with water. Allow the refrigerator or freezer to run for approximately 5 or 6 days. This method is time consuming, but effectively removes strong odors.
- Several commercial products are available for removal of refrigerator and freezer odors. These products may be purchased at hardware, grocery, discount and variety stores.

If the unit has been off several days, it is possible the odor has gone into the insulation. If the odor has penetrated the insulation, much work is needed to get it out. An air compressor might be needed to blow air into this section of the unit.

If the above methods do not satisfactorily take care of odor problems, it may be that drippings from meat or fish leaked into the insulation. This problem would require service by a refrigerator technician, who may have to remove the liner and replace the insulation.

For more information on Food Safety/Preservation or Preparation please call your local County Extension Office or call Angela Treadaway your Regional Food Safety/Preservation/Preparation Extension Agent at 205-410-3696 or email her at treadas@aces.edu