

FAQ: Food & kitchen cleanup

Flood waters covered the food we had stored on shelves and in cabinets. What can I keep and what should I throw out? How should I clean my dishes and pots and pans?

Throw away all food that was touched by flood water – including home-canned food. Throw away any wooden cutting boards, plastic utensils, baby bottle nipples and pacifiers. There is no way to clean them if they came into contact with contaminated flood water. Thoroughly wash metal pans, ceramic dishes and utensils with hot soapy water and sanitize by boiling them in clean water or by immersing them for 15 minutes in a solution of one teaspoon of chlorine bleach per quart of water.

Our home was flooded and I'm worried about the safety of the drinking water. What should I do?

If you live in the disaster area, you need to assume that all water from wells, cisterns and other delivery systems is unsafe until it has been tested. Use bottled water until you are sure that your water supply is safe. Keep a three-day supply of water – or a minimum of three gallons of water per person – on hand throughout hurricane season.

We had a fire in our home and I'm worried about what food I can keep and what to throw away.

Throw away all food that has been near a fire. The heat of the fire, smoke, fumes or chemicals used to fight the fire can damage food. Food in cans or jars may look okay, but heat from a fire creates germs that ruin food.

One of the most dangerous parts of a fire is sometimes not the fire itself, but poisonous fumes that come from burning items. Throw away any raw food or food in packaging such as cardboard, plastic wrap, screw-top jars, bottles, etc. that were stored outside the refrigerator.

Food stored in refrigerators or freezers can also become contaminated by fumes. The refrigerator seal isn't airtight and fumes can get inside. Chemicals used to fight the fire contain toxic materials and can contaminate food and cookware.

You can decontaminate cookware exposed to fire-fighting chemicals by washing in soap and hot water. Then submerge for 15 minutes in a solution of one teaspoon chlorine bleach per quart of water.

The food in my freezer had started to thaw when the power came back on. Is the food safe? How long will the food in the refrigerator be safe with the power off?

First, never taste food to determine if it is safe to eat. You will have to decide on each item separately.

If you keep an appliance thermometer in the freezer, check the temperature when the power comes back on. If the thermometer reads 40 degrees F or lower, then the food is safe and it may be re-frozen. If you don't keep a thermometer in the freezer, check each package of food to determine the safety.

Remember, you cannot tell by looking or smelling a food item. If there are ice crystals in the food, it is safe to refreeze. Refrigerated food should be safe if the power wasn't out more than two hours. Keep your refrigerator door closed as much as possible. Discard any perishable food (such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and leftovers) that has been above 40 °F for two hours.