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Nebraska Extension – Buffalo County
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Food Safety During Power Outages

During power outages, food spoilage can be a serious problem when refrigerators and freezers lose power. Knowing how to determine if food is safe and how to keep food safe will help minimize the potential loss of food and reduce the risk of foodborne illness.

Be prepared before there is an outage. Make sure there is an appliance thermometer in the refrigerator and freezer. Check that the refrigerator temperature is at or below 40°F and the freezer temperature is at or below 0°F. When the power is out, an appliance thermometer will always indicate the temperature in the refrigerator and freezer no matter how long the power has been out.

Stock up on items that do not require refrigeration and can be eaten cold or heated on an outdoor grill. Shelf-stable food, boxed or canned milk, water, and canned goods should be part of a planned emergency food supply. Have ready-to-use baby formula for infants and pet food. Remember to use these items and replace them from time to time. Be sure to keep a hand-held can opener for an emergency.

Consider what can be done ahead of time to store food safely during a power outage. Coolers are a great help for keeping food cold if the power will be out for more than 4 hours—have a couple on hand along with frozen gel packs. When a freezer is not full, keep items close together—this helps the food stay cold longer.

During a power outage, keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed and open them only when necessary. If power is restored within four hours, items in the refrigerator should be safe to eat. A full freezer will stay at freezing temperatures for two days if the door remains

closed. A half-full freezer will stay at freezing temperatures for one day if the door remains closed. Obtain dry or block ice to keep the refrigerator as cold as possible if the power is going to be out for a prolonged period of time. Fifty pounds of dry ice should hold an 18-cubic foot full freezer for two days. Plan ahead and know where dry ice and block ice can be purchased.

When power is restored, check the temperature of the thermometer inside of the refrigerator and freezer. Discard any perishable food (such as meat, poultry, seafood, milk, eggs, or leftovers) that have been at refrigerator temperatures above 40°F for 4 hours or more. Perishable foods with temperatures that are 45°F or below (measured with a food thermometer) should be safe but should be cooked and consumed as soon as possible.

If the freezer thermometer reads 40°F or below, the food is safe and may be refrozen. If a thermometer has not been kept in the freezer, check each package of food to determine its safety. Do not rely on appearance or odor. If the food still contains ice crystals or is 40°F or below, it is safe to refreeze or cook.

Perishable food such as meat, poultry, seafood, milk, and eggs that are not kept adequately refrigerated or frozen may cause illness if consumed, even when they are thoroughly cooked.

For more food safety information contact Nebraska Extension in Buffalo County, 1400 East 34th Street, Kearney 68847, or call (308) 236-1235.