
PRESS RELEASE – January 30, 2009

Jackson County Health Department
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Food Safety and Power Outages

The Jackson County Health Department would like to offer the following suggestion to help area residents better understand food safety and food items that should be discarded when electric service is lost and later service is restored. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends the following:

KEEP THE FREEZER DOOR CLOSED. Keep what cold air you have inside. Don't open the door any more than necessary. You'll be relieved to know that a full freezer will stay at freezing temperatures about 2 days; a half-full freezer about 1 day. If your freezer is not full, group packages so they form an "igloo" to protect each other. Place them to one side or on a tray so that if they begin thawing, their juices won't get on other food. And, if you think power will be out for several days, try to get dry ice or regular ice. Although dry ice can be used in the refrigerator, block ice is better. You can put it in the refrigerator's freezer unit along with your refrigerated perishables such as meat, poultry, and dairy items. Have coolers on hand to put your ice in to keep the food frozen.

EVEN IF FOOD HAS STARTED TO THAW, SOME FOODS CAN BE SAFELY KEPT. The foods in your freezer, that partially or completely thaw before power is restored, may be safely refrozen if they contain ice crystals or at a temperature of 41 ° F or below. Each food product will have to be evaluated separately. The Jackson County Health Department can provide charts and recommendations for different frozen and refrigerated foods that may be refrozen if kept to 41 ° F. You will need to be especially careful with meat and poultry products or any food containing milk, cream, sour cream, or soft cheese. Remember the saying, "When in doubt, throw it out".

MANY FOODS CAN BE REFROZEN WITHOUT MUCH CHANGE IN TASTE. Partial thawing and refreezing may reduce the quality of some foods. Raw meats and poultry from the freezer can usually be refrozen without too much quality loss. Prepared foods, vegetables, and fruits can normally be refrozen, but there may be some quality loss. Fruit juices can be refrozen safely without much quality loss, but frozen fruit will become mushy. Most store bought frozen meals or products will advise you as to if the food may be refrozen. In general, **refrigerated** items should be safe as long as power is out no more than 4 hours.

Keep the door closed as much as possible. Discard any perishable foods (such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and leftovers) that have been above 41 °F for 2 hours or more, and any food that has an unusual odor, color, or texture, or feels warm to the touch.

KEEP AN APPLIANCE THERMOMETER IN THE REFRIGERATOR AND FREEZER AT ALL TIMES. This will remove the guesswork of how cold the unit is because it will give you the exact temperature. To get an accurate temperature place the thermometer at the front of the refrigerator/freezer unit because the foods kept up front are generally warmer than those stored in the back. The key to determining the safety of foods stored in the refrigerator and freezer is to know how cold they are. The refrigerator temperature should read 41 °F or below; the freezer should read 0 °F or below.

BE PREPARED for all power outages. If you live in an area where loss of electricity from autumn or winter storms is a problem, you can plan ahead to be prepared for the worst.

- Stock up on shelf-stable foods – canned goods, juices, and "no-freeze" entrees.
- Plan ahead how you can keep foods cold. Buy some freeze-pak inserts and keep them frozen. Buy a cooler. Freeze water in plastic containers or store bags of ice.
- Know in advance where you can buy dry and block ice.
- Develop emergency freezer-sharing plans with friends in another part of town or in a nearby area.

Weather permitting you may be able to store some frozen food items in a cold garage or outside in protected containers. These are rule-of-thumb guidelines. For the actual handling of specific foods, follow the instructions on the packages or you may call the Jackson County Health Department, Environmental Health Division at 286-5094 for more specific recommendations to keep or discard the food in question. Be sure to discard any fully cooked items in either the freezer or the refrigerator that have come into contact with raw meat juices. Remember, you can't rely on appearance or odor. Never taste food to determine its safety! Some foods may look and smell fine, but if they've been at room temperature too long, bacteria that cause foodborne illness can begin to grow very rapidly. Some types will produce toxins that are not destroyed by cooking. Remember this rule: ***"WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT."***