

Food safety in an emergency

Fact sheet

Following an emergency or disaster event such as a flood, fire, storm or cyclone, there is a danger that some food in your house may not be safe to eat, especially if power has been cut or if food has been in contact with contaminated water.

After an emergency

It is recommended that you dispose of

- food that has been in contact with contaminated water (see below for cans and sealed food containers)
- food that has an unusual odour, colour or texture
- refrigerated food that has been left unrefrigerated or above 5°C for more than four hours
- frozen food after 48 hours (if the freezer is full) or after 24 hours (if the freezer is only half full). If frozen food has partially thawed, the food should be eaten as soon as possible
- canned food where the can is open, swollen or damaged, or has a missing or damaged label.

Commercially canned or air-tight food containers that are sealed, intact, not bulging or dented, may be safe. It is recommended that you

- remove the label since it could harbour dirt, ash and bacteria
- re-label the can with a waterproof marker pen, including the expiry date. Use the product as soon as possible
- thoroughly wash the outside of cans by dipping them in a solution of 1.5 cups of household chlorine bleach in 10 litres of warm water for two minutes and then rinsing it in drinking quality water.

If in doubt, throw it out!

If your vegetable garden has been in contact with contaminated water, the food may be contaminated and unsafe to eat. Contaminants may persist in the soil after the disaster event. Depending on the contamination type it may take at least a month before your home garden is suitable for replanting and/or harvesting of any produce.

Cleaning and sanitising

If benchtops, food utensils or kitchen equipment have been in contact with a contaminant e.g. flood water dust, fire ash, smoke, firefighting water.

- throw away damaged or cracked items, and items made from porous material such as wood, porous plastic or rubber (including wooden chopping boards) as these items cannot be adequately sanitised
- wash utensils and surfaces in hot soapy drinking quality water
- take apart and clean the non-electrical pieces of kitchen equipment and rinse in clean hot water
- sanitise silverware, metal utensils, pots, pans and kitchen equipment in pieces by placing them in boiling water for at least three minutes.



Figure 1 Food in a pantry

- dishes and utensils that cannot be safely placed in boiling water (certain glassware, porcelain, china and enamelware) should be sanitised by immersing them in a disinfecting solution of one tablespoon of chlorine bleach per two litres of warm water, then rinsing with drinking quality water
- clean cupboards and counters with hot soapy water, then rinse with a chlorine bleach solution of one tablespoon of chlorine bleach per two litres of warm water. Rinse thoroughly with drinking quality water
- don't use tea towels that might have been splashed with contaminated water. Wash them with non-colour-stripping bleach solution or antibacterial washing detergent

Remember to wash your hands thoroughly before handling food for consumption or touching clean surfaces.

Water for drinking and cooking

In an emergency, tap water and private water supplies from tanks, wells and bores may become unsafe to drink. If you can you should stock up with bottled drinking water.

Listen to the radio, check your local council website or Facebook page, or check with your water utility provider for public announcements about the safety of your water supply. Private water supplies should be tested before use.

To ensure your water is safe

- use only bottled, boiled or treated water for drinking, cooking or preparing food, washing utensils and surfaces, brushing teeth, hand washing, making ice and bathing
- filter cloudy water through a clean cloth or allow it to settle and then pour off the clear water for boiling. Boil the water then leave it to cool. Store it in a clean, covered container. Boiling will ensure water is safe from most types of harmful bacteria, but will not remove chemical contaminants
- thoroughly clean any containers used to store water with hot, soapy drinking quality water, then rinse with a bleach solution of one tablespoon of bleach per two litres of warm water. Rinse thoroughly with drinking quality water before use.

After a power failure

It is useful to make a note of the time the power failed. Keep cold food **COLD**.

Keep the refrigerator door closed as much as possible while the power is off. A closed refrigerator should keep food cold for four hours.

Freezers will usually not defrost and spoil food for at least 24 hours, provided the door has been kept shut. If frozen foods have thawed, they should not be refrozen but should be kept cold and eaten as soon as possible.

If you have access to ice, pack your refrigerator and freezer to help maintain a cool temperature.

Keep hot food **HOT**.

Throw out food that was being cooked when the power failed, if the cooking cannot be completed within two hours. If food is already properly cooked, eat it within two hours or throw it out.

Further information

- Department of Health www.health.qld.gov.au/disaster and www.health.qld.gov.au/foodsafety
- Contact 13 QGOV (13 74 68) for your nearest public health unit.