

Food Safety Information after a Flood



Contaminated foods may be a problem following contact with water. Floodwater may contain sewage and animal wastes, oil, and other pollutants like agricultural and industrial chemicals. After a flood, the United States Agriculture Department recommends throwing away anything not stored in a waterproof container if there was a chance of contact.

Supplies for cleaning

One of most critical areas needing to be cleaned after a flood is the home kitchen, since many foods may have spoiled without refrigeration and/or been damaged from exposure to water. Plan ahead and have the necessary supplies when returning to your home. Here are some items to consider:

- Potable water for drinking and cleaning. It may be necessary to bring a supply of water for both drinking and cleaning if you are uncertain about the availability of water in your home. Various sizes of drinking water containers are generally available at most grocery stores.
- Dish soap and baking soda
- Bleach; to disinfect surfaces, use 1 Tbsp. 5% unscented bleach in 1 gallon of potable water
- Rubber gloves and/or disposable gloves to wear while cleaning out refrigerators and freezers
- Paper towels for cleaning
- Heavy duty trash bags
- Camera to document contents of pantries, refrigerators and freezers

Food to Discard¹

Do not attempt to save the following foods:

- Opened containers and packages which have come in contact with flood waters.
- Unopened jars and bottles with paper waxy seals such as those containing mayonnaise or salad dressing.
- Containers of spices, seasonings and flavorings.
- Flour, grains, sugars and coffee in canisters or bags.
- Paper, cloth, fiber or cardboard boxes, even if the contents seem dry. This includes salt, cereals, pasta products, rice and any "sealed" packages of crackers, cookies or mixes within a larger paper box.
- Dented seams, bulging, rusty or leaking tin cans, or cans which have been tossed about and are found far from their normal storage spot. Seams on these cans may have been weakened or their seals may have broken, causing contamination or spoilage.
- Containers with non-sealed, fitted lids, such as cocoa or baking powder.
- Commercially-bottled carbonated beverages. If the cap is crusted with silt, don't attempt to wash, since pressure in bottles may cause an explosion.
- Foil or cellophane packages.
- Fresh meat, fish and poultry which have been in contact with flood waters.
- Home-canned foods, even if the jar seems tightly sealed (However, in some cases, tightly sealed home-canned foods may be safe, depending on the flood conditions. If there are questions about the canned food, contact a food preservation specialist, who can advise you after learning specific facts about flood conditions.
- All fresh vegetables and fruits, such as leafy vegetables, which do not have a peel, shell or coating which can be removed before use. **This includes produce from gardens.** Produce which will be cooked, such as potatoes, might be safe to use, depending on the amount of contact with water.

Cleaning metal cans of food¹

Some unopened, undamaged all-metal cans can be saved. First, remove any labels. The paper may contain dirt and germs from the floodwater. Wash the cans with soap and water, and brush or wipe away dirt. Use hot water and water that is safe for drinking if they are available.

Next, place the cans again in water and heat the water to one hundred degrees Celsius. Boil the cans for two minutes. Another way to disinfect them is in a freshly made solution of chlorine bleach. Use one tablespoon of unscented liquid bleach for every four liters of water. Use drinking water or the cleanest, clearest water available. Place the cans in the solution for fifteen minutes. Once cans are clean, let them air-dry for at least one hour before opening or storing them. Relabel them with a marking pen to list their contents and any dates when they are best used by. Experts advise using the cans as soon as possible.²

Cleaning out refrigerators and freezers after an extended time without power

- Perishable foods kept at room temperature provide an environment well suited for rapid growth of microorganisms – including types that cause food spoilage and foodborne illness. Removing those spoiled food items and properly cleaning interior surfaces of the refrigerator and freezer is a priority after returning to your house.
- Use heavy duty trash bags for gathering spoiled food items and transporting to discard site. Don't overfill bags to prevent leakage.
- Liquid food residues may have leaked in hard to reach areas of refrigerator and freezer shelving. If shelves and drawers are removable, take out to immerse in water and clean well.
- Clean inside surfaces with a solution of dish soap in water. For removing odors, use a mixture of two tablespoons of baking soda dissolved in one quart of warm water.

¹Meal Preparation and Food Safety after a Flood, from Univ. of Florida Extension

<http://disaster.ifas.ufl.edu/PDFS/CHAP04/D04-09.PDF>

²Food Safety after a Flood, available from: <http://learningenglish.voanews.com/content/a-23-2008-12-22-voa5-83138472/128915.html>

More resources:

What Consumers Need to Know About Food and Water Safety During Hurricanes, Power Outages, and Floods

<http://www.fda.gov/food/resourcesforyou/consumers/ucm076881.htm#s4>

Safely Using Produce from Flooded Gardens, from Univ. of Wisconsin Extension

http://www.foodsafety.wisc.edu/assets/pdf_Files/Safely%20Using%20Produce%20from%20Flooded%20Gardens.pdf

Food Safety for Consumers Returning Home After a Hurricane and/or Flooding

<http://www.fda.gov/food/resourcesforyou/consumers/ucm076993.htm>

Food Safety After a Flood—National Safety Council

http://www.nsc.org/news_resources/Resources/Documents/Food_Safety_After_a_Flood.pdf

Disaster Relief: Meal Preparation and Food Safety after a Flood (this addresses garden produce, too!)

<http://msucare.com/pubs/infosheets/is1692.pdf>