

Power Outages

A power outage or blackout can happen at any time. Usually power outages are short and the power is restored before we even miss it. Some extreme weather events can cause power outages that last for days. Knowing what to do during a prolonged power outage is important. The following tips should help you stay safe during a power outage.

Food Safety

The perishable food in your fridge and freezer must be kept cold while the power is off. The good news is fridges and freezers are designed to keep the cold air in. You should avoid opening them wherever possible. A fully stocked, upright or chest freezer will keep food frozen for about two days. If the freezer is only half full, the food should stay frozen for one day. Your fridge will keep food cold for four to six hours without power.

- Any food that was stored at or above 4°C for two hours or more should be thrown out. Remember that unsafe food may not smell or look bad.
- If frozen food has thawed and risen above 4°C it should be discarded.
- Adding bags of ice to your fridge or freezer will help maintain the cold temperature.
- Squeeze the frozen food. If you hear the crunch of ice crystals then it is only partially thawed and can be refrozen.
- The best way to ensure your food is safely stored is to put an accurate indicating thermometer in your fridge and freezer.
- Storing food outdoors in cold weather is not a good idea. The sunlight can warm it up and the food could be contaminated by animals.
- If any food comes in contact with raw meat juices it should be thrown out. You can help prevent this by storing raw meats separate and below other foods.
- **“When in doubt; throw it out”.**

Breast feeding is always safe and convenient and continues to be so during emergencies; no special precautions are required; however if your baby is formula fed you may need to change the way you prepare baby formula during a power outage.

- Water used for preparing formula must be sterilized (boiled for at least 2 minutes) for all infants.
- If you can't boil water for mixing formula, use ready to feed formula and disposable nipples
- If you are saving mixed formula, keep in the fridge. If the power has been off for four hours or more; throw it out.
- Use prepared bottles of formula within 24 hours.
- Once you've started feeding a bottle of formula, the bottle should be used within two hours. Throw out any leftovers.

Don't forget to use proper hand washing whenever you are handling food/formula. Alcohol based hand sanitizers are effective when there is no food or visible contaminants on your hands.

Water and Waste Water Safety

Most homes that use well water rely on an electrical pump to move the water into the home. During a power outage, the pump would be off and there would be no water available. Having an adequate supply of bottled water in case of emergency is a good idea. Remember that some homes have treatment systems for their well water that use electricity (e.g. Ultraviolet light). If you restore power to your pump, make sure that your treatment system is working also.

Some on-site septic systems use pumps that run on electricity. The pumps move waste through the system and into the leaching bed or treatment unit. If you are still using water in your home; septic and pump tanks will continue to fill. If the tanks get too full, the effluent could back up into the home. You should limit your water use until the power is restored.

If the pump is between your home and the septic tank you may choose to collect your wastewater in pails and pour it into the inlet side of your septic tank. For a prolonged power outage, having your septic tank pumped by a licensed sewage hauler will allow you to store more wastewater until your pump is working.

Hazards

Some of the safety devices in your home also run on electricity. Many modern homes have smoke detectors hard wired into the home power supply. These devices should have a battery backup feature in case of power outage. These batteries should be checked regularly.

Portable generators can be used to provide power during a blackout. It is important to remember that generators must be used according to manufacturer's instructions and in a well ventilated area. The only safe way to connect a generator to your homes electrical panel is through an approved transfer panel and switch. Those must be installed by a qualified electrician.



For more information, please call the Health ACTION Line at **1-800-660-5853** or visit our website at **www.healthunit.org**

Heating and Cooling

Some home heating appliances use power venting. The fans used for power-venting require electricity to vent combustion exhaust fumes. A power-vented gas fireplace should have a shut-off mechanism that prevents any gas combustion during a power outage. Check to make sure your appliances have the feature.

Staying cool during summer blackouts can be a challenge. Try the following tips:

- Stay out of the sun between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m.
- Drink lots of water.
- Take a cold bath or shower to cool down, if your well and septic system are still operational.
- Wear loose-fitting, lightweight, light-coloured clothing, and don't forget the sunscreen.
- Pay close attention to young children; keep them out of the sun and give them lots to drink.

References:

<http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/concen/tip-con/emurge.shtml> (CFIA Fact sheet)

<http://region.waterloo.on.ca/web/health.nsf/4f4813c75e78d71385256e5a0057f5e1/f7ba207667394f5385256d87005b0f6b!OpenDocument> (Waterloo Public Health)

http://www.getprepared.gc.ca/_fl/pub/pwr-tgs-w-t-d-eng.pdf (Public Safety Canada: Get prepared 72 hours)

<http://health.gov.on.ca/english/public/pub/foodsafef/homefood.html>

http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/pub/watersafe/watersafe_power.html (MOHLTC water - septic advice)