

USDA offers food safety tips in advance of Hurricane Irene

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Source: Bill Bagley, USDA, 8/24/11 The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is issuing recommendations for residents in states that might be affected by Hurricane Irene to minimize the potential for foodborne illnesses in the event of power outages, flooding, and other problems that could be associated with the storm. "Hurricanes not only pose dangers to people's physical safety, but the resulting power outages and other effects of hurricanes also can affect the safety of the food people may rely upon after hurricanes strike," said FSIS Administrator Al Almanza. "The American public should be aware of things they can do to protect the safety of their food before and after natural events." Steps to follow to prepare for a possible weather emergency: •Keep an appliance thermometer in the refrigerator and freezer. An appliance thermometer will indicate the temperature inside the refrigerator and freezer in case of a power outage and help determine the safety of the food.

- Make sure the freezer is at 0°F or below and the refrigerator is at 40°F or below.
 - Freeze containers of water for ice to help keep food cold in the freezer, refrigerator or coolers after the power is out.
 - Freeze refrigerated items such as leftovers, milk and fresh meat and poultry that you may not need immediately — this helps keep them at a safe temperature longer.
 - Plan ahead and know where dry ice and block ice can be purchased.
 - Have coolers on hand to keep refrigerator food cold if the power will be out for more than 4 hours. Purchase or make ice and store in the freezer for use in the refrigerator or in a cooler. Freeze gel packs ahead of time for use in coolers.
 - Group food together in the freezer — this helps the food stay cold longer.
 - Store food on shelves that will be safely out of the way of contaminated water in case of flooding.
- Steps to follow after the weather emergency: •Keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible to maintain the cold temperature.
- The refrigerator will keep food safely cold for about 4 hours if it is unopened. A full freezer will hold the temperature for approximately 48 hours (24 hours if it is half full) and the door remains closed.
 - Discard refrigerated perishable food such as meat, poultry, fish, soft cheeses, milk, eggs, leftovers and deli items after 4 hours without power.
 - Food may be safely refrozen if it still contains ice crystals or is at 40°F or below when checked with a food thermometer.
 - Never taste a food to determine its safety!
 - Obtain dry or block ice to keep your refrigerator and freezer 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 2 days.
 - If the power has been out for several days, check the temperature of the freezer with an appliance thermometer. If the appliance thermometer reads 40°F or below, the food is safe to refreeze.
 - If a thermometer has not been kept in the freezer, check each package of food to determine its safety. If the food still contains ice crystals, the food is safe.
 - Discard any food that is not in a waterproof container if there is any chance that it has come into contact with flood water. Discard wooden cutting boards, plastic utensils, baby bottle nipples and pacifiers.
 - Thoroughly wash all metal pans, ceramic dishes and utensils that came in contact with flood water with hot soapy water and sanitize by boiling them in clean water or by immersing them for 15 minutes in a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water.
 - Undamaged, commercially prepared foods in all-metal cans and retort pouches (for example, flexible, shelf-stable juice or seafood pouches) can be saved. Follow the Steps to Salvage All-Metal Cans and Retort Pouches in the publication "Keeping Food Safe During an Emergency" at: www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Keeping_Food_Safe_During_an_Emergency/index.asp
 - Use bottled water that has not been exposed to flood waters. If bottled water is not available, tap water can be boiled for safety.