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The Top 12 Food Safety Tips for Natural Disasters from Stop Foodborne Illness

In the aftermath of the recent hurricanes, most people understandably worry about home repairs and replacing belongings. However, Stop Foodborne Illness wants to remind those affected by Hurricanes Irma, Harvey and Maria that food safety is just as important, as hurricanes present the possibility of power outages and flooding, compromising the safety of refrigerated and stored food.

“It’s all too common for food to spoil and lead to foodborne illness,” says Deirdre Schlunegger, CEO of [Stop Foodborne Illness](#), a national, nonprofit, public health organization dedicated to preventing illness and death from foodborne pathogens. While many standard food safety practices can apply, Stop Foodborne Illness rounded up some natural disaster-related tips for those currently dealing with hurricane challenges as well as heads up advice for future emergencies.

Since natural disasters can be somewhat unpredictable, the best course of action is to prepare in advance. Follow these preemptive tips to face the storm head on and reduce the risk of contracting foodborne illness:

- Stock up on bottled water in case the public water supply becomes contaminated. A more ecofriendly—and cheaper—alternative is to [store tap water](#) in small, clean containers. Bonus: freeze them and use as ice packs for the refrigerator and freezer to help keep food cold.
- Fill a large, waterproof container with a few days’ worth of single-serve, nonperishable, ready-to-eat foods from various food groups. Stop suggests small cereal boxes, granola bars, trail mix, chips, juice boxes, dried fruit, peanut butter and cans of tuna.
- [Freeze refrigerated items](#)—such as leftovers, milk and fresh meat and poultry—that you may not need immediately to keep them at a safe temperature longer. Additionally, grouping foods together in the freezer helps them stay cold longer.
- Pack extra coolers with ice to keep food cold if the power will be out for more than four hours.
- Move food kept in pantries, drawers and shelves to high places to avoid them coming into contact with flood water

If you are evacuating, do not leave any perishable food behind if possible. Since you may be gone longer than expected and cannot determine how long power was out, refrigerators and freezers may have warmed up and entered the danger zone. For those staying put,

- Keep appliance thermometers in the refrigerator and the freezer to ensure temperatures remain food safe (40 °F or lower in the refrigerator, 0 °F or lower in the freezer) during a power outage. To [help these areas stay cold](#), try to keep refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible. A refrigerator will keep food cold for about four hours if the door is kept closed. A full freezer will hold its temperature for about 48 hours (24 hours if half-full).
- Place meat and poultry on a tray to prevent cross contamination of thawing juices.
- Use dry or block ice to keep the refrigerator as cold as possible during an extended power outage. Fifty pounds of dry ice should keep a fully-stocked 18-cubic-foot freezer cold for two days.

After the weather emergency passes and power is back on, assess the damage to determine what food is and is not safe to eat:

- Check appliances' temperatures. Discard all perishable foods—like milk, leftovers and raw meat—if the refrigerator temperature was higher than 40 °F for two hours or more. Items in the freezer are OK for two days without power, as long as the freezer is relatively full and the door has remained closed.
- Even if the fridge and freezer pass that test you still cannot assume all food is good. Check each item separately. Throw out any food that has an unusual odor, color or texture or feels warm to the touch. If the food still contains [ice crystals or is below 40° F](#), it is safe to refreeze or cook. When in doubt, throw it out.
- Do not eat any food that may have come into [contact with flood water](#) as they cannot be effectively cleaned and sanitized. Discard anything not in a waterproof container—items packaged in plastic, paper, cardboard or cloth or with screw-caps, snap lids, pull tops and crimped caps. Inspect canned foods and discard ones that have swelling, leakage, punctures, holes, fractures, extensive deep rusting or denting severe enough to prevent normal stacking.
- Before cooking in your kitchen again, [sanitize surfaces](#) and utensils along with the [food cans](#) not discarded.

Stop Foodborne Illness is a national nonprofit, public health organization dedicated to preventing illness and death from foodborne pathogens by advocating for sound public policies, building public awareness and assisting those impacted by foodborne illness.

- For more food safety tips please visit www.Stopfoodborneillness.org/awareness/.
- If you [think you have been sickened from food](#), contact your local health professional.
- You may subscribe to receive Stop Foodborne Illness e-Alerts and eNews here: www.Stopfoodborneillness.org/take-action/sign-up-for-e-alerts/.

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For questions and personal assistance, please contact Stanley Rutledge, Community Coordinator, at srutledge@Stopfoodborneillness.org or 773-269-6555 x7.

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