

Caution While Handling Food during Power Outage

Benton County's Environmental Health Division recommends caution when handling food during power outages.

"Without refrigeration, foods could become contaminated with illness-causing bacteria," says Bill Emminger, deputy administrator for Benton County Health Department's Division of Environmental Health. "Consumers should use caution with refrigerated or frozen food at home during any outage." He also reminds residents that during a power outage hot water may not be available, or, for residents with a well with an electric pump, there may be no water available.

In most cases of power failure, commercial food establishments should be closed," says Emminger. "However, facilities with backup power generation or gas-powered appliances, such as stoves or hot water heaters, could possibly continue to operate."

These facilities also need access to large amounts of ice for cooling foods and maintaining proper temperatures. In addition, they must implement alternative procedures to continue to comply with Food Sanitation Rules. Business owners should check with the county's environmental health specialists to determine if they can continue to operate in a safe and sanitary manner.

Some facilities may limit items to the sale of foods that are not potentially hazardous or foods that require little or no preparation. For example, some limited service facilities such as taverns and donut shops that don't serve potentially hazardous foods may continue to operate.

Foods that are potentially hazardous when not refrigerated include:

- Meats, poultry, and seafood
- Milk and milk products
- Eggs and starchy foods including potatoes, rice, beans, pasta, and cooked vegetables

The county offers the following safety tips for consumers and food vendors handling refrigerated foods during a power outage:

- Potentially hazardous foods must be evaluated to determine whether proper storage temperatures have been maintained while the refrigerator power was out. Take into account the amount of time the power has been out, the type of storage unit, the kinds of foods, and the form the foods are in. While the power is out, be sure to keep refrigerator doors closed.
- If the power has been out less than 4 hours, check the temperature of potentially hazardous foods to make sure they are at least 41°F or below. Foods above 41°F should be cooled immediately in ice to 41°F and returned to the refrigerator with the ice left around the items.

- If the power has already been off for more than 4 hours, food temperatures should be checked. Any potentially hazardous foods with a minimum temperature of 41°F (or less) can be iced immediately. Those potentially hazardous foods with temperatures above 41°F should be discarded.
- If it is not known how long the power has been out, assume it has been more than 4 hours and take temperatures of potentially hazardous foods; ice them immediately if they are no higher than 41°F. Any potentially hazardous foods with temperatures above 41°F should be discarded. Generally, "when in doubt, throw it out."

If you have questions about food safety, please contact Benton County's food protection environmental health specialists at 541-766-6841.