

Food Safety After a Flood

Floods are unfortunate and stressful. When the job of cleanup and salvaging needs to begin, it is important to understand that flood water can jeopardize the safety of food. Identifying and discarding potentially unsafe food will help to reduce the risk of food-borne illness.

How does a flood make food unsafe?

Flood water may carry dirt, raw sewage, oil, or chemical waste. If flood water comes into contact with a food item it may be contaminated and should be discarded. Even if a food package appears to be dry it may have been contaminated and should be discarded.

What do I do with food that may be unsafe because of a flood?

The best thing to do is throw away any food item that has been in contact with contaminated flood water. Even if the food or package appears to be dry it still may not be safe.

Food that has been contaminated or spoiled may not look different. You cannot usually see chemicals or pathogens on food. The following food safety tips can help you determine which foods to throw out and which to save.

Inspect all items carefully and throw out:

- **All foods with permeable packaging** such as cardboard, plastic wrap, or screw-top lids. This includes home-canned products and dry foods such as flour, sugar, candy, cereal, baked goods, dried beans, and rice.

- **All screw-top containers and partially opened food in glass or plastic jars and bottles.** Flood water may have seeped into the lids of these containers and contaminated the food.

Only food in sealed, undamaged, airtight metal cans may be considered safe once the cans are cleaned and sanitized before use, according to the instructions in the cleaning section below.

How do I clean after a flood?

It is important to clean and sanitize all surfaces and equipment that has been in contact with flood water. This includes: utensils/silverware, cookware, dishware, food contact surfaces, food preparation equipment, floors, floor sinks, floor drains, and furniture.

Use the following cleaning and sanitizing method to clean and disinfect:

1. Thoroughly wash with soap and water
2. Rinse with clean water
3. Sanitize by immersing in:
 - A mild bleach solution made with 5 ml (1 tsp.) bleach per 750 ml (3 cups) water; or
 - Hot water of 77°C (170°F) or hotter
4. Air dry thoroughly

Closed, undamaged cans containing food can be sanitized by placing them in water and allowing the water to boil for at least two minutes.

Alternatively, you can immerse them for two minutes in a mild bleach solution made with 5 ml (1 tsp.) bleach per 750 ml (3 cups) of water.

Remove labels prior to washing and sanitizing.

Cans that have been cleaned and sanitized should be used as soon as possible as they may rust.

Cans that are bulging or damaged are unsafe and unusable and should be thrown away immediately.

If you suspect that your equipment and utensils have become contaminated during storage, clean and sanitize them just prior to use, even though you may have already cleaned, or sanitized them.

If you have had a power failure as a result of the flood:

- Without power, the refrigerator section will keep foods cool for 4-6 hours if the door is kept closed.
- Throw out perishable foods such as meat, fish, poultry, eggs, and leftovers that have been at temperatures above 4°C (40°F) for more than two hours.
- Keep the freezer door closed to keep it cold inside.
- Without power, an upright or chest freezer that is completely full will keep food frozen for about two days. A half-full freezer will keep food frozen for one day.
- Foods that have thawed in the freezer may be re-frozen if they still contain ice crystals.
- Discard any items in either the freezer or the refrigerator that have come into contact with raw meat juices.
- If you're not sure whether an item is spoiled, play it safe and throw it out.

*If there was a flood in your food establishment/business, please notify Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health to seek assistance. A flood-damaged food premise cannot re-open until the public health inspector gives permission in writing.

Reminder

When there is any doubt about the safety of a food product, it should be thrown out as a precaution.

IF IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT!

Questions?

Contact Public Health by calling 1-800-265-7293 ext. 2673 or visiting our website at www.wdgppublichealth.ca.

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