

## Home Food Safety Information Following a Flood

September 19, 2013



Contaminated foods may be a problem following contact with water. Floodwater may contain sewage and animal wastes, oil, and other pollutants such as agricultural and industrial chemicals. After a flood, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends throwing away anything not stored in a waterproof container if there was a chance of contact.

### ***Supplies for cleaning***

One of most critical areas needing to be cleaned after a flood is the home kitchen, since many foods may have spoiled without refrigeration and/or been damaged from exposure to water. Plan ahead and have the necessary supplies when returning to your home. Here are some items to consider:

- Potable water for drinking and cleaning. It may be necessary to bring a supply of water for both drinking and cleaning if you are uncertain about the availability of water in your home. Various sizes of drinking water containers are generally available at most grocery stores.
- Dish soap and baking soda
- Bleach; to disinfect surfaces, use 1 Tbsp. 5% unscented bleach in 1 gallon of potable water
- Rubber gloves and/or disposable gloves to wear while cleaning out refrigerators and freezers
- Paper towels for cleaning
- Heavy duty trash bags
- Camera to document contents of pantries, refrigerators and freezers

### ***Food to Discard***<sup>1</sup> (Document before discarding)

Do not attempt to save the following foods:

- Opened containers and packages which have come in contact with flood waters.
- Unopened jars and bottles with paper waxy seals such as those containing mayonnaise or salad dressing.
- Containers of spices, seasonings and flavorings.
- Flour, grains, sugars and coffee in canisters or bags.
- Paper, cloth, fiber or cardboard boxes, even if the contents seem dry. This includes salt, cereals, pasta products, rice and any "sealed" packages of crackers, cookies or mixes within a larger paper box.
- Dented seams, bulging, rusty or leaking tin cans, or cans which have been tossed about and are found far from their normal storage spot. Seams on these cans may have been weakened or their seals may have broken, causing contamination or spoilage.
- Containers with non-sealed, fitted lids, such as cocoa or baking powder.
- Commercially-bottled carbonated beverages. If the cap is crusted with silt, don't attempt to wash, since pressure in bottles may cause an explosion.
- Foil or cellophane packages.
- Fresh meat, fish and poultry which have been in contact with flood waters.
- Home-canned foods, even if the jar seems tightly sealed. However, in some cases, tightly sealed home-canned foods may be safe, depending on the flood conditions. If there are questions about the canned food, contact a food preservation specialist, who can advise you after learning specific facts about flood conditions.
- When fresh fruits and vegetables come in direct contact with floodwater, there is no effective sanitation method for ensuring the produce is safe and it should be discarded. For more information on produce from home gardens, see CSU Extension information

### ***Cleaning metal cans of food<sup>1</sup>***

Some unopened, undamaged all-metal cans can be disinfected using a bleach solution or boiling water. First, remove any labels and wash in a strong detergent solution with a scrub brush. If using a bleach solution, immerse scrubbed containers for 15 minutes in cold chlorine bleach solution, using 1 Tablespoon of 5% unscented household bleach in potable water from an approved source. Another option is to place cans in a container of water, heat to boiling, and boil for at least 10 minutes. Once cans are clean, let air-dry for at least one hour before opening or storing. Relabel with a marking pen to list their contents and use by dates. Experts advise using the cans as soon as possible.

### ***Cleaning out cabinets, shelving, refrigerators and freezers after a flood***

- Perishable foods kept at room temperature provide an environment well suited for rapid growth of microorganisms – including types that cause food spoilage and foodborne illness. Removing those spoiled food items and properly cleaning interior surfaces of the refrigerator and freezer is a priority after returning to your house.
- Use heavy duty trash bags for gathering flood-damaged and spoiled food items and transporting to discard site. Don't overfill bags to prevent leakage.
- Clean kitchen counters and food preparation surfaces with a mixture of 1 Tbsp. bleach in 1 gallon water.
- After a power outage, liquid food residues may have leaked in hard to reach areas of refrigerator and freezer shelving. If shelves and drawers are removable, take out to immerse in water and clean well.
- Clean inside surfaces with a solution of dish soap in water. For removing odors, use a mixture of two tablespoons of baking soda dissolved in one quart of warm water.

<sup>1</sup>Meal Preparation and Food Safety after a Flood, from Univ. of Florida Extension  
<http://disaster.ifas.ufl.edu/PDFS/CHAP04/D04-09.PDF>

#### **More resources:**

What Consumers Need to Know About Food and Water Safety During Hurricanes, Power Outages, and Floods <http://www.fda.gov/food/resourcesforyou/consumers/ucm076881.htm#s4>

Food Safety for Consumers Returning Home After a Hurricane and/or Flooding  
<http://www.fda.gov/food/resourcesforyou/consumers/ucm076993.htm>

Food Safety after a Flood—National Safety Council  
[http://www.nsc.org/news\\_resources/Resources/Documents/Food\\_Safety\\_After\\_a\\_Flood.pdf](http://www.nsc.org/news_resources/Resources/Documents/Food_Safety_After_a_Flood.pdf)

**For help with specific food safety questions, contact your county or regional Extension office.**