



## 'Smell test' not safe after power outage

**My parents' electricity often goes out, sometimes for long periods. Mom says food in the refrigerator and freezer is fine unless it smells bad. What would you tell her?**

Food safety experts say to use the hands of a clock — not your nose — to determine whether perishable food is safe after a power outage.

As long as you keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed, the refrigerator will keep food cold enough to remain safe for about four hours. A full freezer will keep food safe for about 48 hours. If the freezer is only half full, it will keep cold enough for about 24 hours.

Unfortunately, many people are in your mother's camp. According to a survey of more than 1,000 people, 65 percent said they used their sense of smell to decide whether perishable foods were safe after a power outage. Only one-third of the respondents said they were aware that they should throw away perishable refrigerator foods after a four-hour outage. The study was published in the July 2011 issue of *Food Protection Trends*.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service has several recommendations regarding extended power outages:

- Keep an appliance thermometer in the freezer in a spot that you can get to easily. When the power comes back

on, look at the thermometer. If it's still under 40 degrees F, that tells you the food is safe and can be refrozen.

- However, any foods (in the refrigerator or the freezer) that have come into contact with raw meat juices should be thrown away.

- Don't wait for an outage: Find out now where you can buy dry ice. It can be used to keep foods cold in both the refrigerator and freezer during extended outages.

Another idea: Always keep a plastic zipper bag with a few ice cubes in the freezer. After a power outage, take a look: If the cubes are still partially intact, you know the freezer didn't get above 32 degrees for very long. If they've obviously completely melted, it's a good idea to carefully look at each food item: Items that still have ice crystals are safe to refreeze.

In the refrigerator, most items should be thrown away if they've been held above 40 degrees F for more than two hours. Be conservative: If in doubt, throw it out. It may be disheartening, but it's better than experiencing several days of foodborne illness.

For more information, including a list of what to save and what to throw away after a power outage, see the FSIS fact sheet, "Keeping Food Safe During an Emergency," at <http://1.usa.gov/emergfood>.

*Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or [filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu).*



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
EXTENSION

OHIO AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH  
AND DEVELOPMENT CENTER

---

**For the week of  
Aug. 14, 2011**

---

**By Martha Filipic**

614-292-9833

[filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu)

**Editor:**

This column was reviewed by Lydia Medeiros, food safety specialist with Ohio State University Extension, scientist with the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center, and professor of human nutrition in the College of Education and Human Ecology.

---

**Communications and  
Technology  
News and Marketing**  
2021 Coffey Road  
Columbus, OH 43210-1044  
614-292-2011

208 Research Services  
Building  
1680 Madison Ave.  
Wooster, OH 44691-4096  
330-263-3780

Ohio State University Extension embraces human diversity and is committed to ensuring that all research and related educational programs are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, or veteran status. This statement is in accordance with United States Civil Rights Laws and the USDA. *Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension*  
TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868