



*Cameron County  
Department of Health and Human Services*

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*Yvette Salinas, Health Administrator*

*Food Safety for Consumers Returning Home  
After a Hurricane and/or Flooding*

After a hurricane and/or flooding, people need to assess all food and food preparation areas and equipment to decide what to keep or throw away. Hurricanes, especially if accompanied by a tidal surge or flooding, can contaminate the public water supply. Water in the hurricane-affected area may not be safe to drink. Local announcements should provide updated information on the safety of the water supply.

**Food**

- Do not eat any food that may have come into contact with flood water. **If in doubt, throw it out.**
- Do not eat food packed in plastic, paper, cardboard, cloth, and similar containers that have been water damaged.
- Discard food and beverage containers with screw-caps, snap lids, crimped caps (soda bottles), twist caps, flip tops, and home canned foods, if they have come in contact with flood water. These containers cannot be disinfected.
- Undamaged, commercially-prepared foods in all-metal cans or retort pouches can be saved if you remove the labels, thoroughly wash the cans, rinse them, and then disinfect them with a sanitizing solution consisting of 1 tablespoon of bleach per gallon of potable water. Finally, re-label containers that had the labels removed, including the expiration date, with a marker.

**Food contact surfaces and equipment**

- When cleaning or disinfecting, wear protective clothing, such as gloves, to avoid skin contact, irritation, or infection.
- Discard wooden cutting boards, wooden dishes and utensils, plastic utensils, baby bottle nipples, and pacifiers that have come into contact with flood water. These items cannot be safely cleaned.
- Thoroughly wash metal pans, ceramic dishes, and utensils (including can openers) with soap and water, using hot water if available. Rinse, and then sanitize them by boiling in clean water or immersing them for 15 min. in a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water (or the cleanest, clearest water available).
- Thoroughly wash countertops with soap and water, using hot water if available. Rinse, and then sanitize by applying a solution of 1 tablespoon of unscented, liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of drinking water (or the cleanest, clearest water available). Allow to air dry.
- Make sure to carefully clean corners, cracks and crevices, door handles, and door seals, in rooms that have been affected by flood water.
- If the power in a refrigerator goes out, keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible to maintain the cold temperature. The refrigerator will keep food cold for about 4 hours if it is unopened. A full freezer will keep the temperature for approximately 48 hours (24 hours if it is half full) if the door remains closed. Buy dry or block ice to keep the refrigerator as cold as possible if the power is going to be out for a prolonged period of time. Fifty pounds of dry ice should hold an 18-cubic foot fully-stocked freezer cold for two days.
- Once the power is restored, determine the safety of your food. If an appliance thermometer was kept in the freezer, check the temperature when the power comes back on. If the freezer thermometer reads 40° F or below, the food is safe and may be refrozen. If a thermometer has not been kept in the freezer, check each package of food to determine

its safety. You can't rely on appearance or odor. If the food still contains ice crystals or is 40° F or below, it is safe to refreeze or cook.

- Refrigerated food should be safe as long as the power was out for no more than 4 hours. Keep the door closed as much as possible. Discard any perishable food (such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs or leftovers) that has been above 40° F for two hours or more.
- Perishable food such as meat, poultry, seafood, milk, and eggs that are not kept adequately refrigerated or frozen may cause illness if consumed, even when they are thoroughly cooked.
- Discard refrigerators that have been submerged in flood water, or if enough moisture was present from liquefied food items to reach the insulation inside the equipment.
- Run your dishwasher, empty through three complete cycles to flush the water lines and assure that they are cleaned internally before washing equipment and utensils in it.
- Discard all ice in ice machines; clean and sanitize (1 tablespoon of bleach per gallon of potable water) the interior surfaces; run the ice through 3 cycles; and discard ice with each cycle.
- Replace all ice machine filters and beverage dispenser filters and flush all water lines for 10 to 15 minutes.

For additional information please contact Cameron County Department of Health and Human Services Public Health Response Program at (956) 247-3625 or e-mail: [Health@co.cameron.tx.us](mailto:Health@co.cameron.tx.us).

Source: U.S. Food and Drug Administration <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/fsdisas5.html>