

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE POWER GOES OUT

Keep the refrigerator and freezer closed, unplug electronics, use flashlights instead of candles, and run any generator outdoors at least 20 feet from windows, doors, and vents. Then plan for food, water, medicine, and temperature day by day.

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The steps are the same whether the outage lasts an afternoon or a week. This page walks through what to do in order, from the first hours through day 7, then gives a printable power outage checklist at the end.

THE FIRST HOURS

Start with the things that protect your food, your equipment, and the people in your home.

- **Keep the refrigerator and freezer closed.** Ready.gov says a refrigerator keeps food cold for about four hours and a full freezer for about 48 hours, as long as the doors stay shut.
- **Unplug appliances and electronics.** Ready.gov advises this to protect them from surges or spikes when the power comes back.
- **Use flashlights, not candles.** CDC recommends battery-powered flashlights and lanterns rather than candles, gas lanterns, or torches to lower the risk of fire. If you must use candles, keep them away from anything that can catch fire.
- **Stay away from downed lines.** CDC says never touch a fallen power line, and do not drive through standing water if downed lines are in it.
- **Check on anyone who depends on medicine or powered medical equipment.** Their clock starts now. See the sections on medicines and medical devices below.

Check your utility's outage map or call them to report the outage and get an estimate for restoration. That estimate tells you which of the sections below you need.

CARBON MONOXIDE: GENERATORS, STOVES, AND INDOOR HEAT

Portable generators produce carbon monoxide (CO) (CDC), and Ready.gov groups camp stoves and charcoal grills with them as CO sources to keep outdoors. Ready.gov describes it as colorless and

odorless, and it can kill people and pets.

■ **WARNING**

Never run a generator, pressure washer, or any gasoline-powered engine inside your home, basement, or garage, or less than 20 feet from any window, door, or vent (CDC). Never use a gas range or oven to heat your home.

CDC's guidance for generators and indoor heat:

- Use an extension cord more than 20 feet long so the generator can sit at a safe distance.
- When you use a generator, have a battery-powered or battery backup CO detector in your home. Ready.gov recommends one on every level.
- Keep camp stoves and charcoal grills outdoors too, at least 20 feet from windows, per Ready.gov.
- If you use a wood stove, fireplace, or space heater, CDC says to be extremely careful and follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Know the symptoms. CDC lists headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion as the most common signs of CO poisoning, and warns that people who are asleep or have been drinking can die before they have any symptoms. CDC's generator safety fact sheet puts it plainly: CO "kills without warning."

Ready.gov adds basic generator handling: keep it dry and out of rain or floodwater, connect appliances with heavy-duty extension cords, and let it cool before you refuel, because fuel spilled on hot parts can ignite.

If you are deciding whether to buy backup power for the next outage, see home backup power.

HOW LONG FOOD STAYS SAFE WITHOUT POWER

CDC gives these times, assuming the doors stay closed:

- **Refrigerator:** about 4 hours.
- **Full freezer:** about 48 hours.
- **Half-full freezer:** about 24 hours.

After 4 hours without power or another cold source such as ice, CDC says to throw out perishable food in the refrigerator: meat, fish, cut fruits and vegetables, eggs, milk, and leftovers. Thawed freezer food that still has ice crystals or is at 40°F or below can be refrozen or cooked.

Keep an appliance thermometer in both the refrigerator and the freezer. CDC says the refrigerator should be at 40°F or below and the freezer at 0°F or below. Ready.gov says to discard food that has been at 40°F or higher for two hours or more, or that smells, looks, or feels unusual. Never taste food to decide whether it is safe. When in doubt, throw it out.

WATER

An outage can affect your water supply as well as your lights. CDC notes that water purification systems may not work fully when the power is out, and that safe water for drinking, cooking, and hygiene includes bottled, boiled, or treated water. Follow any boil-water notice from your local water utility or health department.

Ready.gov recommends storing at least one gallon of water per person per day for several days, for drinking and sanitation.

MEDICINES THAT NEED REFRIGERATION

Some medicines, including insulin and certain liquid antibiotics, need refrigeration (FDA). If a medicine has not been kept at the right temperature, FDA says to check its storage instructions and “contact a pharmacist, health care provider, or the manufacturer to find out if it can still be used.”

CDC says that when the power has been out for a day or more, throw away any medication that should be refrigerated. The exception is a drug someone’s life depends on: use it only until a new supply is available, and replace all refrigerated drugs as soon as possible. FDA gives the same guidance for life-sustaining medicines such as insulin when a replacement is not readily available.

For insulin specifically, FDA says vials or cartridges may be left unrefrigerated between 59°F and 86°F for up to 28 days. Keep insulin as cool as possible, but do not let it freeze, and do not use insulin that has been frozen. Once you have proper storage again, FDA says to throw away vials exposed to extreme temperatures and replace them as soon as possible.

Before an outage, Ready.gov suggests asking your medical provider how long your medications can stay at higher temperatures and getting specific guidance for any life-critical medication.

IF SOMEONE RELIES ON A POWERED MEDICAL DEVICE

If anyone in your home uses an oxygen concentrator, ventilator, powered wheelchair, or other electric medical equipment, plan before the outage. Ready.gov recommends:

- Talking to your doctor or health care provider about how to keep the equipment running during an outage.
- Asking your power company to put you on a list for priority power restoration.
- Contacting your local emergency management office. Many maintain voluntary registries so people with disabilities can get targeted help in an emergency.
- Buying an extra battery for a power wheelchair or other battery-operated device, and keeping spare batteries charged at all times.

STAYING WARM OR COOL

In cold weather, CDC recommends having extra blankets, sleeping bags, and warm winter coats. Hypothermia is a medical emergency: CDC says to get medical attention immediately if a person's body temperature is below 95°F.

In hot weather, CDC suggests finding an air-conditioned shelter through your local health department, spending time somewhere with power such as a shopping mall or public library (even a few hours helps), and taking cool showers or baths. Do not rely only on fans.

If it is too hot or too cold to stay home, both CDC and Ready.gov say to go to a community location or shelter with power, or stay with friends.

DAYS 1 TO 3

If the outage runs past the first evening, settle into a routine.

- **Food:** After 4 hours, deal with the refrigerator as above. Eat from the freezer or move items to a cooler with ice, and check thermometers rather than guessing.
- **Medicine:** At the one-day mark, CDC's guidance on refrigerated medicine applies. Call your pharmacist or doctor about replacements.
- **Generator:** Refuel only after it cools. Check that your CO detector has working batteries.
- **People:** Decide early whether anyone in the home needs a warming or cooling location, rather than waiting until they are in trouble.

DAYS 4 TO 7

A long outage is mainly a supply problem.

- **Food:** A full freezer's 48 hours are long gone. Rely on the nonperishable food Ready.gov recommends keeping, and discard anything you are not sure about.

- **Water:** Track what you have against one gallon per person per day, and watch for boil-water notices.
- **Medicine:** Replace any refrigerated medicine you have been using past its storage limits. Ready.gov says to contact your doctor or pharmacist right away for a new supply.
- **Shelter:** If your home is too hot or cold, or a medical device is running out of power, move to a shelter or community location with power.

WHEN THE POWER COMES BACK

Go through the refrigerator and freezer before you restock them. Ready.gov's rule holds: discard food that has been at 40°F or higher for two hours or more. Throw out refrigerated medicine that sat warm for more than a day unless the label says otherwise, and get a new supply.

POWER OUTAGE CHECKLIST

BEFORE AN OUTAGE

- ☐ Flashlight for every household member, with spare batteries
- ☐ Battery-powered or battery backup CO detector on every level
- ☐ Appliance thermometers in the refrigerator and freezer
- ☐ At least one gallon of water per person per day, for several days
- ☐ Nonperishable food
- ☐ Ask your provider about refrigerated medicine and powered medical devices
- ☐ Ask your utility about priority restoration if anyone uses powered medical equipment
- ☐ Find nearby warming and cooling locations

FIRST HOURS

- ☐ Keep the refrigerator and freezer closed
- ☐ Unplug appliances and electronics
- ☐ Use flashlights, not candles
- ☐ Stay away from downed power lines
- ☐ Generator outdoors only, at least 20 feet from windows, doors, and vents
- ☐ Never heat the home with a gas range or oven
- ☐ Report the outage and note the restoration estimate

DAYS 1 TO 3

- ☐ Throw out perishable refrigerator food after 4 hours without power or ice
- ☐ Check freezer and refrigerator thermometers
- ☐ Call your pharmacist about refrigerated medicine after a day without power
- ☐ Let the generator cool before refueling

- ☐ Test CO detector batteries
- ☐ Move to a warming or cooling location if needed

DAYS 4 TO 7

- ☐ Eat from nonperishable food stores
- ☐ Track water against one gallon per person per day
- ☐ Follow any boil-water notice
- ☐ Replace refrigerated medicine as soon as possible
- ☐ Go to a shelter if heat, cold, or a medical device makes home unsafe

AFTER POWER RETURNS

- ☐ Discard food held at 40°F or higher for two hours or more
- ☐ Replace refrigerated medicine that sat warm for more than a day
- ☐ Restock water, batteries, and food

TRACK	Power outage
SHEET	1 of 9
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COMPILED FROM THESE SOURCES

1. Ready.gov, Power Outages
2. CDC, What to Do to Protect Yourself During a Power Outage
3. CDC, Keep Food Safe After a Disaster or Emergency
4. CDC, Generator Safety Fact Sheet
5. Ready.gov, Water
6. FDA, Safe Drug Use After a Natural Disaster
7. FDA, Information Regarding Insulin Storage and Switching Between Products in an Emergency
8. Ready.gov, People with Disabilities

Every safety claim on this sheet links to its primary source.