

MEDICAL EQUIPMENT AND MEDICINE IN A POWER OUTAGE

Make a plan with your provider and device maker before an outage. FDA says insulin may be kept unrefrigerated between 59°F and 86°F for up to 28 days. For other refrigerated drugs, CDC says to discard them after a day without power unless a life depends on them and no replacement is available yet.

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This page collects what FDA, CDC, and Ready.gov say about medicine and medical equipment when the power is out. It is not medical advice. Your doctor, pharmacist, and device maker know your specific medicines and equipment; ask them, and use this page to know which questions to ask.

■ SOURCE

Everything below quotes or closely paraphrases FDA, CDC, Ready.gov, and HHS, and goes no further. For a decision about a specific medicine or device, ask your doctor, pharmacist, or the device maker.

PLAN BEFORE THE OUTAGE

Ready.gov says to “talk to your medical provider about a power outage plan for medical devices powered by electricity” and to “find out how long medication can be stored at higher temperatures.” Its power outage page also says to have alternate plans for refrigerating medicines or using power-dependent medical devices.

For anyone who uses electric medical equipment at home, Ready.gov recommends:

- Talking to your doctor or health care provider about what you can do to keep the equipment running during a power outage.
- Asking your power provider to put you on a list for priority power restoration.
- Contacting your local emergency management office. Many city and county emergency management agencies maintain voluntary registries for people with disabilities.
- Buying an extra battery for a power wheelchair or other battery-operated medical or assistive device, and keeping extra batteries charged at all times. If you cannot buy one, ask what agencies, organizations, or local charitable groups can help.

FDA adds: notify your electric company and fire department that you have a medical device that needs power, such as a ventilator or apnea monitor.

What to keep on hand

Ready.gov's list for people with medical needs includes:

- A several days' supply of prescription medicines. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about how to build an emergency supply.
- A list of all medications, dosages, and allergies, plus your diagnosis, dosing frequency, and medical supply needs.
- Extra eyeglasses, contacts, hearing aids, and batteries.
- A backup supply of oxygen.
- A list of the style and serial number of your medical devices, with special operating instructions if needed.
- Spare chargers for electronic devices, kept charged.
- A lightweight manual wheelchair as a backup to a power wheelchair, if possible.

MEDICINES THAT NEED REFRIGERATION

FDA says some medicines require refrigeration, "for example, insulin and certain liquid antibiotics," and that temperature-sensitive medicines may lose potency when not stored at the recommended temperature.

If a medicine has not been kept at the recommended temperature during an outage, 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 gives this rule:

- "When the power is out for a day or more, throw away any medication that should be refrigerated," unless the drug's label says otherwise.
- "If a life depends on the refrigerated drug," use it "only until a new supply is available."
- "Replace all refrigerated drugs as soon as possible."

FDA says the same for life-sustaining drugs: if the medicine is needed to sustain life (for example, insulin) and a replacement is not readily available, it may be used until a new supply can be obtained.

INSULIN WITHOUT REFRIGERATION

FDA says:

- Insulin vials or cartridges, opened or unopened, “may be left unrefrigerated at a temperature between 59°F and 86°F for up to 28 days.”
- Insulin that has been diluted or removed from the original vial “should be thrown away within two weeks.”
- “Under emergency conditions, you might still need to use insulin that has been stored above 86°F.”
- “Keep insulin away from direct heat and out of direct sunlight.”
- “If you are using ice, avoid freezing the insulin.” “Do not use insulin that has been frozen.”
- For pump users: “If the pump insulin is exposed to temperatures above 98.6°F, throw it away.”
- When proper storage is available again, “throw away any vials that were exposed to extreme temperatures and replace them as soon as possible.”

FDA’s page also lists insulin manufacturers’ phone numbers for questions about whether insulin is still suitable, and notes that you should confirm the current number on the package insert or the manufacturer’s website. FDA’s page covers some products with different limits, so check the page and your product’s insert for your specific insulin.

KEEPING MEDICAL DEVICES RUNNING

FDA’s guidance for a power outage:

- **Know your backup options.** Read your user instructions or call your distributor or device manufacturer to find out whether the device can run on batteries or a generator. FDA also says to locate a generator if possible.
- **Check for water first.** Make sure you check for water before plugging in your device, and do not plug in a power cord if the cord or the device is wet.
- **Check settings when power returns.** When the power is restored, check that the settings on your medical device have not changed. FDA notes that devices often reset to a default mode after an interruption.
- **Get help with damage.** If your device appears damaged, or if you need a backup device, contact your distributor or device manufacturer.
- **Use safe light around oxygen.** Always use battery-powered flashlights or lanterns rather than gas lights or torches when oxygen is in use.

If you plan to use a generator, FDA warns never to run a generator, pressure washer, or any gasoline-powered engine inside a basement, garage, or other enclosed structure, and never outside an open window or door where exhaust could come in. See generator safety for placement rules.

If you plan to use a battery power station, ask the device maker whether your device can run on it, and work out the runtime with the method in how big a portable power station you need.

MEDICAL DEVICES AND SUPPLIES THAT NEED REFRIGERATION

Some devices and supplies, not only drugs, have storage temperature limits. FDA says the manufacturer's instructions in the product labeling explain specific needs for refrigeration, and gives this guidance:

- During the outage, do not open refrigerators or freezers until the power is restored. FDA says most will maintain their temperatures for at least one day if they have not been opened.
- If you must remove products, keep them on ice or dry ice at the required temperature until use.
- After power is restored, measure the temperature of the refrigerator or freezer, and discard products if the temperature has risen above the safe storage temperature.
- If you are not sure whether a product is safe to use, contact the manufacturer.

BREAST MILK AND INFANT FEEDING

CDC says to keep the freezer door closed to help prevent stored breast milk from completely thawing, and that once milk has thawed, use it within 24 hours. For formula and feeding supplies, see emergency food storage.

HEAT, MEDICINE, AND PRIORITY RESTORATION

Ready.gov says to read the side effects of your medications and talk with your doctor about how heat exposure will interact with them. It also says to ask your local energy utility for priority access in the event of power loss if power restoration is life-sustaining for someone in the home. For cooling steps, see staying cool without power.

WHAT HHS EMPOWER IS

You may see the HHS emPOWER Program mentioned in outage planning. According to its program page, it was launched by HHS's Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response and uses Medicare claims data to give public health authorities, first responders, and community organizations counts of Medicare beneficiaries who rely on electricity-dependent medical equipment and certain health care services, down to the ZIP Code level.

It is a planning tool for officials, not a sign-up list. The program page does not describe a way for individuals to register. For help aimed at your household, use the steps above: your utility's priority list and your local emergency management office.

WHEN TO LEAVE HOME

Ready.gov says to “go to a community location with power if heat or cold is extreme” and to check with local officials about heating and cooling locations open near you. Find yours before the outage, and plan how a person with a powered device or refrigerated medicine would get there. The plan you make with your provider should say when to leave.

MEDICAL OUTAGE CHECKLIST

BEFORE AN OUTAGE

- ☐ Ask your provider for a power outage plan for each powered device
- ☐ Ask how long each medicine can be stored at higher temperatures
- ☐ Ask the device maker whether the device can run on batteries, a generator, or a power station
- ☐ Ask your power provider about its priority restoration list
- ☐ Tell your electric company and fire department about life-sustaining equipment
- ☐ Contact your local emergency management office about voluntary registries
- ☐ Keep spare device batteries charged
- ☐ Write down medicines, doses, allergies, and device model and serial numbers
- ☐ Keep a several days' supply of prescription medicines and a backup oxygen supply

DURING THE OUTAGE

- ☐ Keep the refrigerator closed
- ☐ Keep insulin out of direct heat and sunlight, and do not let it freeze
- ☐ Check for water before plugging in any device
- ☐ Use battery lights, never gas lights or torches, around oxygen
- ☐ Run any generator outdoors only
- ☐ Call your pharmacist about refrigerated medicine after a day without power
- ☐ Go to a location with power if heat, cold, or a device makes home unsafe

WHEN POWER RETURNS

- ☐ Check device settings
- ☐ Measure refrigerator temperature before using refrigerated supplies
- ☐ Replace refrigerated drugs and any insulin exposed to extreme temperatures

☐ Recharge spare batteries and backup power

For the full day-by-day outage plan, see what to do when the power goes out.

TRACK Power outage

SHEET 8 of 9

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COMPILED FROM THESE SOURCES

1. FDA, Safe Drug Use After a Natural Disaster
2. FDA, Information Regarding Insulin Storage and Switching Between Products in an Emergency
3. FDA, FDA Offers Tips about Medical Devices and Natural Disasters
4. FDA, Medical Devices Requiring Refrigeration
5. CDC, What to Do to Protect Yourself During a Power Outage
6. Ready.gov, People with Disabilities
7. Ready.gov, Power Outages
8. HHS ASPR, emPOWER Program: About
9. CDC, Facts About Infant Feeding During Emergencies

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