KEEP YOUR FOOD SAFE AFTER THE HURRICANE

Charley has come and gone. Now the cleanup is under way. Many residents have had their power restored and are contemplating what to do with food in their refrigerators and freezers. The following information will guide you about what to do when your power has failed.

Without power, a full upright or chest freezer will keep everything frozen for about two days. A half-full freezer will keep food frozen for one day. Without power, the refrigerator section will keep food cool for four to six hours depending on the kitchen temperature. Many consumers have been out of power for up to a week. In this situation if you have not kept perishable foods on ice, they need to be discarded.

With the freezer closed, foods usually will stay frozen at least a day, or perhaps two or three days depending on the quantity of insulation. Food in well-fitted, well-insulated 4-cubic-foot home freezers will not begin to spoil in fewer than three days. In 12- to 36-cubic-foot freezers, food will not begin to spoil in fewer than five days and may be all right seven or eight days if the food is very cold. The thawing rate depends on:

- The amount of food in the freezer. A full freezer stays cold longer than a partially full one.
- The kind of food. A freezer filled with meat stays cold longer than a freezer filled with baked goods.
- The temperature of the food. The colder the food, the longer it will stay frozen.
- The freezer. A well-insulated freezer keeps food frozen longer than one with little insulation.
- Size of freezer. The larger the freezer, the longer food stays frozen.

What do you do if your food has thawed? Partial thawing and refreezing reduces the quality of foods particularly fruits, vegetables and prepared foods. Red meats are affected less than many other foods. You may safely refreeze foods if they still contain ice crystals or if they have been kept at 40°F or below for no more than two days. If the temperature is above 50°F, throw food away. Foods that cannot be refrozen but are safe may be canned immediately. Treat completely thawed foods as follows:

- Frozen dinners. Do not refreeze frozen dinners that have thawed. If they are not kept cold and consumed immediately they must be discarded.
- Vegetables. Do not refreeze thawed vegetables. Bacteria in these foods multiply rapidly. Spoilage may begin before bad odors develop. Such spoilage may be toxic. Refreeze vegetables only if ice crystals remain throughout the package. If you question the condition of any vegetables, discard them.
- Meat and poultry. Meat and poultry become unsafe to eat when they start to spoil. If any package of meat has an offensive or questionable odor or if the freezer temperature has exceeded 40°F for two hours or longer, don't use. Discard all stuffed poultry. Immediately cook thawed but unspoiled meat or poultry. Cooked meat can be refrozen.
- Fish and shellfish. These are extremely perishable. Do not refreeze unless ice crystals remain throughout the package. Seafood may be spoiled even if it has no offensive odor.
- Ice cream. Do not refreeze melted ice cream. Discard or consume it in the liquid form before off flavor develops.
- Cook thawed frozen foods and frozen dinners immediately if they are still cold. Do not refreeze. If any foods have an offensive or questionable odor, do not eat.
Refrigerated foods should be handled as follows:

- Most chopped meats, poultry and seafood sandwich fillings should not be left unrefrigerated longer than two hours.
- Raw chopped meats such as hamburger spoil quickly. Pork, fish and poultry spoil quickly. Dispose of them if they have been in the refrigerator without power for 12 hours or more. Do not rely on your sense of smell.
- Hard cheese usually keeps well at room temperatures. Other cheeses, such as cream cheese, opened containers of cheese spreads and cottage cheese, spoil quickly. Throw out when off flavor develops. If surface mold develops on blocks of cheese, slice off a portion 1 inch below the surface and discard.
- Milk spoils quickly without refrigeration. Throw out spoiled milk.
- Custard, gravies, creamed foods, chopped meats, poultry and seafood sandwich fillings spoil quickly when unrefrigerated and provide ideal growing places for organisms that can cause illness. Dispose of these foods if they have warmed to room temperatures. Spoilage is difficult to detect because there may be no offensive odor or taste.

If you have questions or concerns about specific foods, please call the extension office at 321-697-3000.

Mary Beth Salisbury  
Family & Consumer Services Agent  
Osceola County Extension Service  
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane  
Kissimmee, FL 34744  
321-697-3000  
msal2@osceola.org  
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu  
Date: August 22, 2004