

Food safety in the home after a flood

This fact sheet provides food safety information for consumers and members of the public who have been affected by the floods and power cuts due to flooding.

Don't eat food that's been in contact with floodwaters

- Floodwaters can be contaminated with sewage; bacteria, viruses, and parasites; chemical contaminants such as pesticides, heavy metals, and petroleum products; and physical contaminants such as glass and debris.
- Because of this, do not consume any food that has been in contact with floodwaters. All contaminated food (apart from tins) needs to be thrown away, including anything in twisttop bottles or stored in containers.
- Unopened, undamaged tins need to be washed thoroughly in clean, soapy water before being opened and used. Dry them thoroughly if they're being stored so they don't rust. Discard tins that are deeply dented, particularly around the seams, or heavily rusted.
- If you have been given food, make sure you know where it comes from and that the donated food has not been in contact with floodwaters.

Refreezing food

Once the power is back on, check the food in your freezer.

- If the food is still visibly frozen (for example, if it still has ice crystals on it) and the packaging isn't damaged or open, you can safely refreeze it.
- If the food has thawed, you should not refreeze it.
- You can still keep or use thawed food if it has not started to look or smell bad. Keep it cold (like in the fridge) until you are ready to eat or cook it.

Power failures: What to do with the food in your fridge and freezer

When the power goes out, here's what to do to avoid getting sick from unsafe food:

- Eat foods that will expire soon first – such as bread, meat, salads, and dairy products – because they spoil more quickly than non-perishable food.
- During the power failure, open your fridge/freezer as little as possible to help keep it cooler for longer. Unopened fridges should hold refrigeration temperature for 4 hours.
- Freezers will remain colder for longer if they are full (2-4 days) compared to if they are half full (1-2 days). So, leave already frozen food in the freezer if possible.
- Eat your canned and non-perishable pantry foods last.



Produce from your garden

- If you have a vege patch or fruit trees, do not eat vegetables or fruit submerged by or even splashed by floodwater.
- Clean up and remove debris from your garden and sprinkle it with garden lime, if available.
- Produce that has been damaged only by rain, and which has not come into contact with any floodwater, should be safe to eat once washed.

Focus on hygiene when preparing and cooking food

Maintaining hygiene around food preparation and cooking will require more thought than normal but is still essential to keep you and your whānau healthy.

- Always wash your hands and, if possible, dry them before preparing food – if water is in short supply, keep some in a bowl with disinfectant.
- Ensure all kitchen utensils and food-preparation surfaces are clean before and after use.
- Cook food thoroughly.

How to keep your water safe and clean

Check if there are any boil-water notices in your area. You'll need clean water to cook, wash dishes, and wash your hands.

If you do not have safe running water:

- You can use water from a hot-water cylinder, a toilet cistern – as long as no chemical toilet cleaner is present – or bottled water.
- Boil or purify water before using it in food preparation to avoid spreading viruses and bacteria between food. Re-boil the water if it is not used within 24 hours.
- If you are not able to boil water, use purifying tablets or bleach to ensure water safety. Add 5 drops of household bleach per litre of water (or half a teaspoon for 10 litres) and leave for 30 minutes. Do not use bleaches with added scent or perfume, surfactants, or other additives – they can make people sick.

Disposing of food

If in doubt, throw it out. All perishable food can become unsafe to eat if it reaches temperatures where harmful bacteria can grow and cause of food poisoning.

- Does the food from your fridge, freezer or pantry smell or look different? Has the colour changed and does it have a slimy texture? If so, it's likely unsafe and should be binned.
- Throw away all food (except cans) and drinking water that has come into contact with floodwater, including items in twist-top bottles or stored in containers.
- Place food waste in bin bags to avoid attracting rats, mice, and flies.

Collecting kai moana

- Avoid collecting live seafood from the ocean straight after any large-storm events due to the increased risk of contamination from stormwater runoff or overflows from sewerage systems.
- Do not gather any dead fish or shellfish that have washed up on beaches, no matter how fresh they may look, as they can contain harmful bacteria.



For more information

www.mpi.govt.nz/funding-rural-support/adverse-events/food-safety-in-natural-disasters-and-emergencies/

Food safety is just one step in staying safe during and after an emergency. Civil Defence has more information on what to do. Visit www.civildefence.govt.nz/