

IS YOUR FOOD SAFE AFTER THE FLOOD?

When the flood waters go down in the home and the family can finally move back in, often the first concern is over the house itself and the furnishing inside. In addition, families need to be aware that any foodstuffs left in the home may also be contaminated and decisions will also have to be made about whether to keep or throw away. The flood waters that have entered your home may carry silt, raw sewage, oil or chemical wastes. In addition, dirt and disease bacteria are carried in these waters and will contaminate foods, making them unsafe to eat.

We all know that foods left in freezers and refrigerators that have been turned off or went off because of lack of electricity are not safe if kept at room temperature for two hours or more. These all need to be disposed of right away. If the appliance is still in running order but food has spoiled leaving an odor, steps need to be taken to clean the inside of the appliance and disinfect the surfaces. Here are some ideas for removing unwanted odors.

- Use a solution of 1 cup vinegar to a gallon of water, or 1 cup household ammonia to a gallon of water, or ½ cup chlorine bleach to a gallon of water. **Do not** combine any of these household chemicals as the toxic fumes can be fatal.
- Take out all the removable parts and wash with mild soap and water.
- Fill a large shallow container with vinegar. Set in the refrigerator or freezer several hours and if odor persists, let set two or three days, changing the vinegar every 8 hours.
- Try activated charcoal which you can purchase at a drug store or pet supply store to absorb any lingering odors. Place the charcoal in a large shallow pan in the bottom of the appliance and leave for several days. The charcoal needs to be changed every few days. After the odor is gone, rinse and dry the interior before putting food back.

All your food is not in the refrigerator or freezer, however, and so a decision needs to be made about the safety of those foods. If the following foods have come in contact with flood waters, or even if they are in the same areas in which there have been flood water, discard them. That includes:

- meat, poultry, fish, and eggs
- fresh produce
- unopened jars with waxed cardboard seals (mayonnaise and salad dressing containers, for example.)
- all food in cardboard boxes, paper, foil, cellophane, or cloth
- spices, seasonings and extracts
- home-canned foods
- all opened containers and packages
- flour, sugar, and other staples in canisters
- cans that are dented, leaking, bulging, or rusted

That doesn't leave much does it? All that is really safe to keep are undamaged canned goods and commercial glass jars of food. And then these foods are safe if you sanitize the containers in the following way.

- Mark the contents on the can or jar lid with indelible ink.
- Remove labels. Paper can harbor dangerous bacteria.
- Wash jars and cans in a strong detergent solution with a scrub brush.
- Immerse containers for 15 minutes in a solution of 2 teaspoons chlorine bleach per quart of room temperature water.
- Allow containers to air dry before opening.

Finally, the axiom to remember in all of this is – If in doubt, throw it out. Your family’s health and safety is the important consideration in all this.

Source: Purdue University Cooperative Extension, CFS-119, *Food Safety*