



Cornell University Cooperative Extension of Delaware County

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FLOOD CONTAMINATED FOODS

Food may be contaminated during storms that cause flooding. Flood waters may carry silt, raw sewage, oil or chemical wastes. Filth and disease bacteria in flood water can contaminate food, making it unsafe to eat.

Thoroughly inspect any food left in the house after a flood. Flood water may have covered it, dripped on it, or seeped into it. Even though some foods (see below) are protected by their containers, if you are in doubt about the safety of a food, throw it out rather than risk disease. Use the following guidelines when deciding which foods to discard and which to save:

Food To Discard

- Opened containers and packages which have come in contact with flood waters.
- Glass jars and bottles of commercially canned food such as apple sauce, mayonnaise, or salad dressing. Contaminated silt may be impossible to clean from under the edges of lids.
- Containers of spices, seasonings, and flavorings.
- Flour grains, sugar and coffee in canisters or bags.
- Paper, cloth, fiber or cardboard boxes, even if the contents seem dry. This includes salt, cereals, pasta products, rice and any “sealed” packages of crackers, cookies or mixes, within a larger paper box.
- Cans with dented seams, bulges, rusty spots or leaks
- Cans which have been tossed about and are found far from their normal storage spot. Seams on these cans may have been weakened or their seals broken, causing contamination or spoilage.
- Jam or jelly sealed with paraffin
- Containers with non-sealed, fitted lids, such as cocoa or baking powder.
- Commercially bottled carbonated beverages, if the cap is crusted with silt; don’t attempt to wash, since pressure in bottles may cause an explosion.
- Foil or cellophane packages.
- All fresh vegetables and fruits.
- Fresh meat, fish, and poultry which have been in contact with flood waters.
- Home-canned foods

If you are sure that home-canned food was NOT completely immersed in flood water, and the jar tops did not get wet, the jars may be washed, rinsed, and then sanitized with a strong household bleach solution (1 tablespoon/quart room temperature water). This solution is stronger than that used in sanitize commercially canned foods since jars of home-canned foods cannot be washed as vigorously as commercial cans because the seal might be loosened.

Food To Keep

- Undamaged commercially canned foods in metal cans that are not bulging, leaking or badly dented.

Cleaning And Sanitizing

Cans that have been covered with flood-water or backed-up water in a basement must be thoroughly washed, rinsed and sanitized. Use this method:

1. Mark contents on the can with a permanent in pen.
2. Remove paper labels as they can harbor dangerous bacteria.
3. Wash cans in a strong detergent solutions with a scrub brush. Carefully clean areas around lids and seams.
4. Rinse in clean water.
5. Soak cans in a solution of two teaspoons of 5.25% household chlorine bleach per quart of room temperature water for 15 minutes.
6. Air dry before opening.
7. Clean and sanitize tableware, dishes, and cookware in the same way.

While raw foods exposed to flood waters should be avoided because of possible contamination, sometimes they must be used because there is not other food available. If raw foods must be used, wash and rinse them thoroughly and rinse them with a solution of 2 teaspoons 5.25% household chlorine bleach per gallon of water. This solution is weaker than that used to sanitize cans because some bleach may be consumed when the food is eaten. Do not use scented or “color-safe” bleaches or bleaches with added cleaners.

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