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Living Well

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Keeping Food Safe in Emergencies

Severe weather affects many people each year. As we have already experienced strong storms in our area this year, consider the following tips to keep food safe during weather emergencies and power outages.

Before a Potential Storm:

*Keep an appliance thermometer in the refrigerator and freezer. This will help you determine the safety of food if a power outage occurs. Freezers should be at or below zero degrees Fahrenheit and refrigerators should be at or below 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

*Freeze refrigerated items that you do not need immediately. If electricity is lost, frozen foods will stay colder longer and be more likely to stay safe to eat.

*Freeze containers of water or gel packs ahead of time. These can be transferred to your refrigerator or a cooler to help keep food cold longer in the event of a power outage.

After a Storm:

*If you experience a power outage, keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible. This will help maintain the cold temperature. The refrigerator will keep food safe for about 4 hours if it is unopened. If food is kept at or below 40 degrees Fahrenheit, it is safe to eat.

*A full freezer will hold the temperature for approximately 48 hours (24 if it is half full) if the door remains closed. Fifty pounds of dry ice should hold an 18-cubic-foot full freezer for days. Food may be safely refrozen if it still contains ice crystals or is at or below 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

*Discard perishable foods such as meat, poultry, fish, soft cheeses, milk, eggs, leftovers, and deli items after 4 hours without power. Food may be safely refrozen if it still contains ice crystals or is at 40 degrees Fahrenheit or below when checked with a food thermometer.

*When in doubt, throw it out! Never taste food to determine its safety.

If flooding has occurred:

*Do not eat any food that has been in flood water. Discard any food that is not in a waterproof container if there is a chance that it might have come in contact with flood water. Food containers that are not waterproof include those with screw-caps, snap lids, pull tops, and crimped caps. Discard wooden cutting boards, plastic utensils, baby bottle nipples, and pacifiers.

*Discard food in cardboard juice, milk, baby formula boxes and home canned foods. If they have come in contact with flood water, they cannot be effectively cleaned and sanitized.

*Inspect canned foods and discard any food in damaged cans. Can damage is shown by swelling, leakage, punctures, holes, extensive deep rusting, or denting severe enough to prevent normal stacking or opening with a can opener.

*Undamaged, commercially prepared food in all-metal cans and retort pouches can be saved. Remove labels, wash in soap and water, sanitize, and air dry. Use as soon as possible.

*Clean countertops with soap and hot water, then sanitize with a bleach solution.

*Clean cookware and utensils with soap and hot water. Sanitize in boiling water or immerse in bleach solution for 15 minutes.

For more information regarding food safety contact the Flint Hills Extension District office in Council Grove at (620) 767-5136 or the office in Cottonwood Falls at (620) 273-6491.