

Food safety after a flood

How to prepare your food safely in the event of a flood.

If your home has been flooded or your water supply has been cut off, it's important you know how to prepare food safely.

Flood water can be contaminated with sewage, animal waste and other waste, from drains or the surrounding area. This means it may contain harmful bacteria, viruses or chemicals.

Any contaminants in the water are usually very diluted and so the risks of getting ill are low. Following simple hygiene practices will help you to avoid getting ill from flood water.

Safe food preparation and storage

To stop harmful bacteria that might be present in flood water spreading to your food, we advise that you:

- don't eat any food that has been touched or covered by floodwater or sewage
- clean and disinfect all work surfaces and kitchen equipment before using them with food – in a dishwasher if you can, or by using a suitable disinfectant
- throw away wooden chopping boards and wooden spoons if they have come into contact with flood water
- clean and disinfect the inside of your fridge and food cupboards if they have been touched by flood water
- don't use work surfaces or things like plates if they are badly chipped or damaged
- if your tap water may be contaminated, boil and cool it before using it to wash food that won't be cooked, such as fruit or salad

If your power has been cut off, our advice on food in your fridge or freezer is:

- if your fridge has not been working for more than four hours, throw away the food inside
- throw away ice cream if it has gone soft
- meat and fish that are still below 8°C can be cooked and refrozen, or cooked and eaten
- food in a freezer can remain frozen for 24 hours or more – the fuller the freezer, the longer the contents will remain frozen
- store opened food in a container with a lid to make sure the food doesn't become contaminated

If you have a catering business and have been affected by flooding, ask for advice from the environmental health service at your local authority. [Find contact details of your nearest local authority](#).

Preparing baby food

If your drinking water supply is either interrupted or contaminated by flooding, it is important to be careful with the water you use. When preparing formula and baby feeds:

- ideally use water from a bowser (a water tank provided by water companies), or use bottled water

- bring water to a 'rolling' boil and leave it covered to cool for no more than half an hour
- follow the manufacturer's instructions on making up the feed
- use cooled, boiled water for cooling the feed once it has been made up
- consider using ready-to-feed liquid formula instead

If there is no electricity or gas to allow boiling, bottled water can be used without boiling to prepare baby feeds. The prepared feed should then be used immediately.

Some bottled water labelled as 'natural mineral water' may have high levels of sodium or sulphate. When buying bottles of natural mineral water, look at the label and check that:

- the figure for sodium (or 'Na') is not higher than 200mg a litre
- the figure for sulphate ('SO' or 'SO4') is not higher than 250mg a litre

If it is, try to use another water. If no other water is available, then use this water for as short a time as possible.

Always wash your hands before preparing formula and before feeding an infant. You can use alcohol-based hand sanitizer for cleaning your hands if the water supply is limited.

Remember to clean feeding bottles with bottled, boiled, or treated water before each use.

Home-grown fresh fruit and vegetables

If fresh produce that you are growing, either to sell or for your own consumption, is contaminated by floodwater, this is our advice. For fruit and vegetables to be eaten raw:

- throw away any produce that has come into contact with flood water if it is to be eaten raw such as lettuce or strawberries
- it's fine to eat produce that is growing above the water and has not come into contact with flood water such as fruit on trees

Fruit or vegetables to be eaten raw and planted after flooding should not be harvested for at least six months after the floodwater has receded. This is to make sure that any harmful germs in the soil from the flood water won't survive and contaminate the produce.

If the growing cycle of the crop is shorter than six months, delay replanting. It's important to ensure that harvesting does not take place until six months after the floodwater receded.

You do not need to delay re-planting if the growing cycle is 6 months or more, or if the fruit and vegetables will be cooked before being eaten.

You can eat fruit and vegetables that are going to be cooked, even if they've been in contact with flood water. This is because cooking will kill any harmful germs that might be present. Remember to:

- wash fruit and veg thoroughly before storing, preparing or cooking them, to reduce the risk of cross-contamination
- pay attention to removing any visible soil, preferably outside the home
- always wash your hands before and after handling produce

Further advice on how to wash, store and prepare raw vegetables safely is available within the NHS Choices flooding advice. If you need any more information, speak to the environmental health service at your local authority.

Disposing of flood-damaged food

Put flood-damaged food in black plastic refuse sacks, double bagged if possible. Then seal the sacks and put them out when your next refuse collection is due.

Remember to check with insurers before disposal because food may be insured. Do not be tempted to try to salvage food. This includes tins as they may be damaged or contaminated.