

# Food Safety After a Flood

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This fact sheet is for informational purposes only. It is not intended to take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

Floods are unfortunate and stressful. In the aftermath, people are left to salvage what they can, including food and food products. It is important to understand that flood water can jeopardize the safety of food. This fact sheet provides assistance in identifying food that may not be safe to eat following a flood. Identifying and discarding potentially unsafe food will help to reduce the risk of food borne illness or intoxication (intoxication happens when one eats food contaminated with chemical compounds called toxins). This fact sheet also contains information about cleaning up after a flood, and information for owners/operators of a food establishment/business.

## How does a flood make food unsafe?

Flood water may carry silt, raw sewage, oil or chemical waste. If the flood water comes into contact with food, it can contaminate the food and make it unsafe to eat. Unpackaged foods that come into contact with the flood water may be contaminated. Packaged food can also be contaminated when flood water covers or seeps into food containers.

## What do I do with food that may be unsafe because of a flood?

Thoroughly inspect all food items and discard any food that has been contaminated by flood

water. If you are in doubt about the safety of any food, throw it out rather than risk illness or disease.

Note: Food that has been contaminated or spoiled may not look different. You cannot usually see chemicals or pathogens on food. The following food safety tips can assist you to determine which foods to discard and which to save.

### You should discard:

- **Food stored in permeable containers.** Screw-caps, snap lids, pull tops and crimped-cap containers are examples of containers that may not be waterproof.
- **Food wrapped in paper, plastic cloth, fibre or cardboard.**
- **Food that has come in direct contact with flood water.** This includes meats, fish, poultry, fruits and vegetables (raw or cooked).
- **Home-canned food in glass containers that have come in contact with flood water.** Throw away the food and the flat part of the lids. The empty jars can be washed and sterilized for future use.
- **Commercially-canned foods that are damaged.** Cans that are bulging, swelling,

leaking, punctured, dented or have holes, fractures or are rusting should be thrown out.

- **Porous items that may come in contact with food or with a person's mouth.**

These items include: baby bottle nipples and pacifiers; wooden bowls; and plastic, paper or foam food storage containers and utensils.

If the cap of a commercially-bottled carbonated beverage is crusted with silt, do not attempt to wash it as the pressure in the bottle may cause an explosion.

Only food in commercially sealed, unopened, water proof airtight jars or metal cans should be considered safe once the containers are cleaned and sanitized according to the instructions in the cleaning section below.

## How do I clean after a flood?

Clean and sanitize all areas and non-permeable equipment affected by flood water. This includes: utensils/silverware, cookware, dishware, food contact surfaces, food preparation equipment, floors, floor sinks, floor drains, and furniture.

Use the following cleaning and sanitizing method to clean and disinfect:

- Thoroughly wash with soap and water; ensure that any dirt, silt or chemicals are brushed or wiped away
- Rinse with clean water
- Sanitize by immersing in:
  - a mild bleach solution made with 5ml (1 tsp) bleach per 750 ml (3 cups) water;
  - or
  - hot water of 77° C (170° F) or hotter
- Air dry

If applicable, closed undamaged cans containing food can be sanitized by placing them in water and allowing the water to boil and continue to boil for at least two minutes, or by immersing them for two minutes in a mild bleach solution made with 5ml (1 tsp) bleach per 750 ml (3 cups) of water. When sanitizing cans, remove labels prior to washing and

sanitizing. Re-label cans after air drying. Cans that have been cleaned and sanitized should be used as soon as possible as they may rust.

## What if the flood was at my food establishment/business?

Following a flood at a food establishment/business, notify public health authorities in your region.

Following a flood, food establishments' operators may want to resume operation as quickly as possible. However, it is important that all food preparation and service is discontinued until the appropriate steps have been taken to protect the public's health.

The owner/operator(s) of the food establishment should notify the public health authorities (such as the local health department) in their region, and seek assistance. For a list of local health departments in your area see attached link: [http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/cont\\_act/phu/phuloc\\_mn.html](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/cont_act/phu/phuloc_mn.html)

Other food safety authorities:

Canadian Food Inspection Agency:  
<http://www.inspection.gc.ca>

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs: [www.omafra.gov.on.ca](http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca)

## Reminder

Where there is any doubt about the safety of a food product; it should be thrown out as a precaution.

**IF IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT!**

**WASH YOUR HANDS THOROUGHLY.**

## References

United States Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Services  
[http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact\\_Sheets/Keeping](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Keeping)

[Food Safe During an Emergency/index.asp#  
questions](#)

Canadian Food Inspection Agency  
[http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/concen/  
tipcon/emurge.shtml](http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/concen/<br/>tipcon/emurge.shtml)