

# POWER OUTAGES

Use the following tips during a power outage to help you and your family stay safe.

## Food safety

Power outages can make food unsafe to eat due to lack of refrigeration. The following tips will help reduce food spoilage and prevent a potential food-borne illness during an outage:

### Freezer:

- Without electrical power, a full freezer will keep food frozen for approximately two days and a half-full freezer will keep food frozen for one day
- Keep the freezer door closed as much as possible to help frozen food last longer, ice will also help the food stay frozen
- Food items that still contain ice crystals can be refrozen

### Refrigerator-freezer combination:

- If the door is kept closed as much as possible, a fridge without electrical power will keep food cool for four to six hours, ice can also help keep the fridge's contents cool
- Do not eat any food with a bad colour or odour as it may be spoiled
- Throw out meat, fish, poultry, eggs and any leftovers that have been out for more than two hours at temperatures above 4°C (40°F)
- Consider using coolers or ice chests with a supply for food storage
- If in doubt, throw it out

## Safe water

### Communal or municipal water:

Your local water utility will issue a Boil Water Advisory (BWA) or Drinking Water Advisory (DWA) if there is a problem with the safety of the water. How do you know if a BWA or DWA has been issued?

A BWA will be communicated by municipal water utility and/or the local Medical Officer of Health through the local media. You can also contact Health Connection at 1-800-361-5653, TTY 1-866-512-6228 to find out if a BWA or DWA is in effect.

### How to treat tap water when a BWA has been issued:

1. Bring the water to a boil for at least one minute (water should be bubbling and rolling). If you have to use a gas barbecue to boil water, use it outdoors. Never use gasoline or charcoal-burning devices inside your home, basement, garage or near a window during a power outage. Carbon monoxide gas from these appliances can build up in your home and poison the people inside
2. If you can't boil your water, you can use the following method to treat your tap water:
  - a. Add 1.25ml (1/4 teaspoon) of unscented liquid household bleach containing 4 to 6% chlorine to 4.5 litres (17 cups) of water
  - b. Mix well and allow to stand for a minimum of 15 minutes
  - c. If you want to use the water to make infant formula, cover the container with a clean paper towel or loose lid and let the water stand overnight in a cooler or refrigerator. This will allow the bleach to clean the water and then dissolve so it does not affect the formula's taste

## PUBLIC HEALTH

1-800-361-5653

TTY: 1-866-512-6228

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### **How to treat tap water when a DWA has been issued:**

- In this case, do not drink tap water; instead, use an alternate source of safe water, such as commercially bottled water or follow the instructions above to treat tap water when a BWA has been issued

### **Private well water:**

- If you use water from your own well, a power outage will normally cause your water pump to stop working. Use an alternate source of safe water, such as commercially bottled water or follow the instructions on page one to treat your tap water
- If you have a backup power generator, you can continue to use the water normally, as long as you make sure the water purification system you are using, such as an ultraviolet light, is also operating
- If you still have water during a power outage, because a generator is powering the water pump, but the water is contaminated by floodwaters, then do not use the water for cooking, drinking or bathing. Instead, use bottled water or water from the municipal water supply

**Note: Boiling will not remove chemicals, so water from flooded wells should be tested before being used**

### **Private sewage disposal systems:**

If you are on a private sewage disposal system, check to see if it is using an electric pump. If so, limit your water use until power is restored, as a sewage backup may occur if the septic and pump tanks get too full.

If the pump is between your home and the septic tank, you can also collect your wastewater in pails and pour it into the inlet side of your septic tank. For a longer power outage, having your septic tank pumped by a licensed sewage hauler will allow you to store more wastewater until your pump is working again.

## **Extreme temperatures**

Power outages can leave homes and other buildings without heat or air conditioning. This can pose health risks when combined with extreme cold or heat, especially to those who are most vulnerable, such as young children, seniors and people with pre-existing medical conditions.

Take the following steps to stay safe:

### **Extreme heat**

- Drink plenty of cool water before feeling thirsty
- Close blinds and curtains to reduce the heat coming into your home
- Open windows at night if the outdoor air is cooler
- Check on family, friends or neighbours who may be at higher risk for heat-related illnesses

### **Extreme cold**

- Make sure your head, face, ears, neck, hands and feet are well protected
- Drink warm fluids
- Do not ignore shivering, it is a sign the body is losing heat

## Prevent carbon monoxide poisoning

Carbon monoxide (CO) is an invisible, odourless and tasteless gas produced by fuel-burning appliances and equipment. CO can build up in an enclosed space and cause sudden illness and death if inhaled. During a power outage, ventilation systems will not work and this can result in CO gas building up in a home or garage.

### Tips to avoid CO poisoning:

- Never use any gasoline, natural gas or propane equipment intended for outdoor use in homes, garages, basements, crawl spaces and other enclosed areas; even with ventilation. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for use
- Use outdoor gas-powered equipment away from doors, windows, vents and air conditioning units
- Shut off the gas going to your gas fireplace, if it is power-vented, to prevent any gas from burning
- If you start to feel sick, dizzy, or weak while using gas-powered equipment, turn off the item immediately, get to fresh air right away and seek medical attention
- If you smell unusual odours such as gasoline, natural gas or propane, immediately leave the property and call your local gas company and fire department

## Prevent electrical hazards

Power outages caused by flooding can lead to electrical shocks or electrocution.

Stay safe by:

- Staying out of floodwaters as much as possible, especially near electrical lines or outlets
- Wearing rubber boots to avoid electrical shocks
- Shutting off power in flooded areas at the breaker box and notifying your power company
- Turning off all tools, appliances and electronic equipment, and not using electrical devices while standing in or near water
- Turning the thermostat(s) for the home heating system down to minimum
- Returning home after a flood only after local authorities have told you it is safe to do so
- Calling 911, if someone has been electrocuted and ensuring they are no longer in contact with the electrical source before you touch them

For more information on how to stay safe during a power outage, contact Health Connection at 1-800-361-5653.

## Resources:

- [York Region's Emergency Preparedness Guide](#)
- York Region Public Health's [Food Safety for Operators during a Power Outage](#) factsheet
- York Region PSA [Safety Tips During a Power Outage](#)
- York Region Public Health's information on [Extreme Heat and cold](#)
- Government of Canada's [Power Outage factsheets](#)
- Technical Standards and Safety Authority Carbon Monoxide Safety <http://cosafety.ca/>