

Reopening a food business after a power cut or civil emergency (e.g. earthquake, flood)

As you get your business up and running again, it's vital extra steps are taken to ensure food is safe for your customers.

What you do next will depend on the amount of damage to your premises and equipment, the availability and amount of drinking water supply you need, condition of food in stock and the type of food you want to sell.

The following points and the Reopening a food business checklist provide a summary of the most important things to consider as a food retailer reopening for business.

1. Are premises structurally sound for preparing or handling food?

Once the building has formally been declared as safe, you will need to make sure any damage to food areas does not stop you from operating hygienically. Is there a chance that food will become contaminated, such as from leaking sewerage or damaged ceiling or wall claddings falling onto food?

Make sure the services you need for power, water supply and drainage haven't been damaged or weakened in the premises.

2. Are toilets and personnel hygiene facilities working?

Make sure toilets for staff and customers are in working order. If a "boil water" notice is in effect, staff should wash hands using cooled boiled water or water treated with bleach or chlorine (5 drops of bleach to 1 litre of water); then use a hand sanitiser. Have hand wipes and hand sanitisers available for customer hygiene.

3. Can the premises be thoroughly cleaned before use?

Areas used for food preparation and serving will need to be thoroughly cleaned, and food preparation surfaces and utensils sanitised before use, to ensure there is no risk to food safety.

4. Is the water safe to use?

If a "boil water" notice is in effect, it is recommended that you use a supply of bottled drinking water if you need to use water as an ingredient in food while the notice is in place.

Turn off ice machines until the "boil water" notice has been lifted.

Turn off post-mix and slushy machines until the "boil water" notice has been lifted.

Most coffee machines only heat water to 80–85°C, so these machines need to be supplied with pre-boiled water. Plumbed-in machines should not be used.

Remember to use only cooled boiled water or water treated with bleach or chlorine (5 drops of bleach to 1 litre of water) to wash hands when preparing food. Use a sanitiser after washing hands, especially if water is scarce.

Identify the best way to boil or chlorinate the water needed and make someone responsible for maintaining the supply.

Using disposable gloves might help, but remember to change them regularly and wash your hands in clean water when you do so.

When the "boil water" notice has been lifted, run taps to check the water before you use it. If you notice anything unusual with the colour or cloudiness or smell, contact your water supplier for advice. Don't use the water until your supplier has confirmed that it is okay. Further information about water in food businesses can be found at:

www.foodsafety.govt.nz/elibrary/industry/food-control-food-fcp-plans/water_supply.pdf

5. Is food still safe to use?

Check how long fridges, chillers and freezers have been without power because food safety may have been affected. As a rule:

- If power to fridges and chillers was off for less than 24 hours, and chillers were not opened during the power cut (or opened only briefly to add bags of ice), contents must be checked but should be okay.
- If power was off for more than 24 hours, or chillers were opened (e.g. not to add bags of ice), potentially hazardous food should be discarded.
- In either instance, food beyond its "use-by" date must be thrown out.

Potentially hazardous foods are those that need to be kept at 5°C or below. These are foods containing meat, fish, dairy products; plus prepared salads, sandwiches, cooked rice and pasta and processed foods containing eggs, beans, nuts or other protein-rich foods. Any harmful microbes on these foods can grow when the temperature of the food increases.

- Perishable foods in the chiller, for example, fruit and hard cheeses, may still be safe to use if they are not showing obvious signs of spoilage.
- If a freezer was full, power was off for less than four days and the freezer was not opened during the power cut and there is no evidence of thawing, contents should be okay to use.
- If power was off for more than four days, or the freezer was opened during the power cut, or the freezer was not full, or there is any evidence that contents have completely thawed, or have thawed then refrozen, then DO NOT USE THE FOOD – throw it out. And don't feed it to your pets.
- Partially thawed food in the freezer should be completely defrosted and used immediately.

Food still frozen with ice crystals throughout can continue to be kept frozen if you are sure it did not thaw out and then refreeze when the power came back on. Frozen food that has defrosted and was refrozen when the power was restored should not be used. This will not always be obvious, but important signs of defrosting and refreezing will be misshapen products, or drip

from packaging that has become frozen, or packages stuck together, or the pooling of frozen fluids in the bottom of sealed packages.

Other foods, such as shelf-stable foods, should be checked for damage. These foods can be used as long as packaging is intact and food is not exposed. Cans should not have damage around edges and seals. Thoroughly clean packaging before opening to prevent contamination of food.

If in doubt, throw it out.

6. Is refrigeration working?

Make sure chillers, freezers, display cabinets and other equipment have not been damaged and will work as intended.

7. Food for sale

Particularly while a “boil water” notice is in place, think about providing food that requires minimum handling or is very thoroughly cooked.

8. Sourcing new supplies

If you are restocking from local suppliers, ensure perishable or frozen foods were not affected by power outages. Check that your supplier has taken the steps indicated in 5 above.

9. Do your staff know what to do?

It is important everyone knows what they must do to produce safe food during an emergency, particularly if there is a disrupted clean water supply. It is vital hands and food preparation surfaces are kept clean. Mark different pots and pans being used to boil or cool water so people know which ones to use. **If in any doubt about what you should do, contact the Environmental Health Officer at your local council.**

Reopening a food business after a power cut or civil emergency – checklist

1. Call your local authority

Check with your local council before you open up to find out about any post-emergency provisions it may have for food businesses (e.g. a “boil water” notice).

2. Check the building condition

Can you officially use the building (e.g. has it been declared safe after an earthquake)?

If yes, make sure that the condition of the building structure, surface finishes and fittings allow you to hygienically prepare and handle any open food. Can debris drop onto food? Can surfaces used for food be kept clean?

3. Check the condition of the services and equipment

Make sure that services, facilities and equipment are fully functioning. Is sewage contained within the pipework and not flowing through the premises? Have power and water supplies to the building been damaged? If any services cannot be used, have you made adequate provision for:

electricity

gas

drinking water supply (see also 8 below):

boiling/cooling water

tankered-in water

bottled water

disposing of waste water

toilets

hand washing with clean water, soap, towels, hand sanitiser

disposing of rubbish

cooking, refrigerating and freezing food.

4. Is refrigerated food okay? If in doubt, throw it out!

Have fridges been damaged? Have contents been contaminated by water/sewage/debris?

Check how long fridges were without power.

If power was off for less than 24 hours, and chillers were not opened during the power cut, contents must be checked but should be okay.

If power was off for more than 24 hours, or chillers were opened during the power cut (other than to add bags of ice), potentially hazardous food should be discarded.

Throw out all food beyond its “use-by” date.

5. Is frozen food okay? If in doubt, throw it out!

Have freezers been damaged? Have contents been contaminated by water/sewage/debris?

Check how long freezers were without power.

If the freezer was full, power was off for less than four days and the freezer was not opened during the power cut and there is no evidence of thawing, contents should be okay to use.

If power was off for more than four days, or the freezer was opened during the power cut, or the freezer was not full, or there is any evidence that contents have thawed, or thawed and refrozen, then DO NOT USE THE FOOD – throw it out. And **don't feed it to pets or send for pig food. This food should not be used.**

6. Check all other food

Throw out cans that leak and have badly dented seams or rims.

Throw out any items with damaged packaging that exposes the food.

7. Cleaning and sanitising

Clean food packaging, if required, before opening it.

Check that all stocks of food packaging materials are clean (e.g. takeaway containers).

Clean all food areas and clean and sanitise food surfaces, utensils and equipment.

Clean customer areas and clean and sanitise crockery and cutlery etc.

8. Before reopening

Check whether food served and stocked could be changed to a simpler and/or “safer” option.

Make sure staff know what to do and understand how your business will be operating until normal service has been resumed.

9. Boil the water?

Check whether there is a “boil water” notice in place for drinking water. Identify who will be responsible for maintaining a supply of boiled water (for drinking and cleaning food surfaces) or chlorinated water (for general cleaning) and also keep hand-washing facilities stocked with soap, clean towels and hand sanitiser.

Additional information about food safety when reopening after an emergency is available from MPI at: www.foodsafety.govt.nz

If you have any specific food safety questions not covered by the available advice please phone 0800 69 37 21 for further information.