

Food safety after a flood - consumer advice

How to prepare your food safely in the event of a flood in the home as a consumer or have home-grown fruit and vegetables.

If your home has been flooded or your water supply has been cut off, it's important you continue to store and prepare food safely. The exact steps you need to take will depend on the severity of the flood and/or the local situation. You should follow guidance provided by relevant national and local organisations to stay safe and avoid becoming unwell.

Flood water is dirty and can be contaminated with sewage, animal waste and other waste, from drains or the surrounding area. This means it may contain harmful bacteria or viruses. The water may also be contaminated with chemicals, although these are likely to be diluted and the risk from getting ill from chemicals in flood water is low. There are also simple hygiene steps you can take to help to keep your food safe.

You should be cautious especially if you or others fall into a vulnerable category (young children, older people and people with an underlying health condition).

Contaminated water supply

Water companies have a duty to take all necessary steps to protect public health. If a water treatment works becomes flooded and this affects the drinking water supply, they will provide specific advice to those affected. For example, you may be told, in exceptional circumstances, to stop drinking the water or to boil it before you drink it or to brush your teeth. In these situations, you should:

- continue to use water as an ingredient in food preparation where foods are to be cooked further e.g. baking or boiled
- use preboiled, cooled water to wash fruit and vegetables, if they are to be eaten raw
- use preboiled and cooled water to make ice
- avoid contaminating food through contact with flood water particularly food that will be eaten without being cooked

Private water supplies

If you draw your water from a private water supply such as a private well or spring in an area that has been affected by flooding contact your local authority for advice. If it has been contaminated or you believe it to be contaminated, follow guidance provided by relevant national and local organisations and the steps above.

Hygiene steps to take to help keep your food safe

Cleaning and avoiding cross-contamination

It is important that you continue to cook, handle, and prepare your food properly. This includes washing your hands before touching food and [cleaning work surfaces and utensils](#) and continuing to keep raw and cooked foods separate to [avoid cross-contamination](#).

You can use alcohol-based hand sanitiser and/or other non-water based products (e.g. wet wipes, alcohol gels) for cleaning your hands if the water supply is also cut off or if you have no clean water.

It is extremely important you clean all work surfaces and food preparation equipment thoroughly before use. As long as you clean properly you can use the cleaning product of your choice, following manufacturer's instructions where these are provided. This includes hot soapy water.

Powerful disinfectants, such as strong bleach, are not generally needed, Antibacterial surface wipes or other products that do not need water to be effective and can be used if you do not have access to water. A hot dishwasher cycle will remove and/or kill any harmful bacteria that may be present.

Safe food preparation and storage

To avoid becoming unwell, we advise that you:

- don't eat any food that has been touched or covered by floodwater or sewage
- discard any food and beverages that are not in a sealed waterproof container if your home is affected by flood water
- discard food in packaging with screwcaps, snap lids, pull tops, crimped or metal caps, home canned foods and any permeable packaging - this is because they may not be fully waterproof
- discard any food in porous or damaged packaging, this includes crushed/dented/swollen cans
- you can keep food which is in water resistant packaging including undamaged metal cans, sealed plastic pots and pouches (like flexible, shelf-stable juice, rice pouches), tetra packs - wash the outside of the packaging before storage/opening to avoid spreading contamination.
- do not prepare food directly on work surfaces if they are chipped or cracked and discard chipped or cracked crockery - bacteria can grow in the cracks and make you ill
- throw away wooden chopping boards and wooden spoons if they have come into contact with flood water as they can absorb contaminated water
- clean and disinfect the inside of your food cupboards
- remember to check your fridge is functioning properly
- it is advisable to discard any food in your fridge or freezer if the appliances have come into contact with flood water - do not turn them on unless they have been checked they are safe for use

Power cut during a flood

More information can be found on our [Food safety in a power cut - advice for consumers](#) page.

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

Home-grown fresh fruit and vegetables

If the growing area you are using is affected by flooding, the produce that you are growing (to sell or for your own consumption) could become contaminated:

- throw away any produce that has come into contact with flood water
- produce that has been growing above the flood water line, such as fruit on trees may have been contaminated through splashing, so it is advisable to cook this before eating, as

- cooking will effectively destroy any harmful micro-organisms that might be present
- washing and peeling produce will also reduce the risk

If you need any more information, [speak to the Food safety team at your local authority](#).