Iowa Department of Public Health
Division of Environmental Health

When Flooding Occurs – Food Salvage

Overview: Food contamination is often a problem after a flood because flood water can carry mud, raw sewage, chemicals, and fuel. Filth and disease-causing bacteria can contaminate any food the water contacts and make that food unsafe to eat. This fact sheet provides guidance on safe handling of food impacted by flood waters.

Never taste food to determine its safety. **If in doubt, throw it out.**

Discard any food that is not in a waterproof container if there is *any* chance that it has come into contact with flood water.

- Food containers that are not waterproof include those with screw-caps, snap lids, pull tops, and crimped caps.
- Also discard cardboard juice/milk/baby formula boxes and home canned foods if they have come in contact with flood water, because they cannot be effectively cleaned and sanitized.

Inspect canned foods and **discard any food in damaged cans**. Can damage is shown by swelling, leakage, punctures, holes, fractures, extensive deep rusting, or crushing/denting severe enough to prevent normal stacking or opening with a manual, wheel-type can opener.

Undamaged, commercially prepared foods in **all-metal cans** and **retort pouches** (like flexible, shelf-stable juice or seafood pouches) can be saved if you follow this procedure:

1. Remove the labels, if they are the removable kind, since they can harbor dirt and bacteria.
2. Brush or wipe away any dirt or silt.
3. Thoroughly wash the cans or retort pouches with soap and water, using hot water if it is available. Rinse the cans or retort pouches with water that is safe for drinking, if available, since dirt or residual soap will reduce the effectiveness of chlorine sanitation.
4. Sanitize cans and retort pouches by immersion in one of the two following ways:
    - Place in water and allow the water to come to a boil and continue boiling for 2 minutes, or
    - Place in a freshly-made unscented liquid bleach solution **prepared following manufacturers label instructions for sanitizing**.
5. Air dry cans or retort pouches for a minimum of 1 hour before opening or storing.
6. If the labels were removable, then re-label your cans or retort pouches, including the expiration date (if available), with a marking pen.
7. Food in reconditioned cans or retort pouches should be used as soon as possible thereafter.

Produce from home gardens should be discarded if it has been in contact with flood waters.

If the floodwater contained waste from septic tanks or other sources of raw sewage; your garden will take about a month to recover. Do not eat or preserve food during this time.

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