

How to Prepare for a Power Outage

Short-term power outages are inconvenient. Storms or energy shortages sometimes make the power go out. In some cases these outages can also be life threatening. By preparing for outages in advance, you'll have a plan to use when the power goes out.

Gather Supplies Before a Blackout Happens

Make a "blackout kit" before the lights go out. Include the following supplies:

- Flashlight
- Batteries
- Portable, battery-powered radio or TV
- Water (at least 1 gallon per person, per day)
- Non-perishable foods
- A whistle to alert rescue workers

Stay Calm and Stay Cool

Here are a few helpful tips on how to reduce the dangers of a power outage:

- Only use a flashlight for emergency lighting.
- Do not use candles – they are a serious fire hazard.
- Turn off all electrical equipment that was on when the power failed.
- Avoid opening your refrigerator or freezer to keep contents cold.
- Do not run a generator inside your home or garage.
- Do not connect a generator to a home's electrical system.
- If you use a generator, connect the equipment you want to power directly to the generator.
- Keep a battery-powered or hand crank radio handy to get the latest news.

Summer Outages Create Special Concerns

In the summer, a power outage can stop air conditioners and fans that move cooler air. Some power outages can also stop water treatment plants, making clean water that's safe to drink in short supply.

In case of a summer power outage:

- Check on family or neighbors who may not be mobile.
- Consider evacuating beyond the reach of the blackout.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Wear light clothing.
- If you can, move to areas with generated power (malls, shelters, etc.)
- Listen for news updates on a battery-powered or hand crank radio or TV.
- Watch for heat-related illnesses, especially in children, the elderly and disabled.

For more information, see this website's section on "Extreme Heat" and learn more about blackouts by viewing "Are You Ready?" from FEMA.

Winter Power Outage: Are You Prepared?

Without power you quickly lose access to many essentials of modern life. Depending on the time of year and the duration, a power outage can mean the difference between life and death. On the other hand, while a summer wind storm can cause a temporary loss of power and be a major inconvenience and loss of food in the freezer; even a short winter outage in Montana is a risk to humans, livestock, pets and structures. Are you prepared?

Since you never know when and how long you could be without power here are a few tips to prepare for these three essentials:

1. warmth and comfort
2. cooking and water
3. sanitation, hygiene and health

General

Prepare an emergency kit (batteries, flashlight, foods, waters, bedding, candles, etc.) for at least 72 hours without power – in isolated rural areas, especially during winter months perhaps longer.

Safety Comes First! During the winter if you need emergency heating for your home, to decrease the risk of starting your house on fire, getting injured, and being poisoned from toxic fumes; safety is the primary consideration when choosing and using backup heating and cooking systems.

Home Heating Options:

Severe winter storms can cause power outages for a few days or even weeks. Some common alternative sources of home heating are fireplaces, space heaters, wood-burning stove and kerosene heaters. Keep in mind however, for stoves the have blowers, augers to feed fuel-pellets or other electric controls, these appliances will not fully function without electricity. Of course using any nonelectrical/ utility provided fuel heating system will require an ample supply of wood, pellets, propane, kerosene, etc.

Appliances that should not be used for home heating:

- Charcoal grills
- Unvented shop-type propane space heaters
- Unvented home kerosene heater (unless properly vented)

Power Outage Checklist

Check equipment in your home to see if it may be affected. This includes fire and security alarm systems, programmable thermostats, appliances, consumer electronics, garage door openers, electronic locks.

Stock disaster supplies to last several days to a week for yourself and those who live with you. This includes having nonperishable foods, stored water, and an ample supply of prescription and nonprescription medications that you regularly use.

As you would in preparation for a storm of any kind, have some extra cash on hand in case electronic transactions involving ATM cards, credit cards, and the like cannot be processed. Plan to keep cash in a safe place, and withdraw money from your bank in small amounts.

It is suggested that you keep your automobile gas tank about half full.

In case the power fails, plan to use alternative cooking devices in accordance with manufacturer's instructions. Don't use open flames or charcoal grills indoors.

Do not plan to use gas-fueled appliances, like an oven, as an alternative heating source. Camp stoves and heaters should only be used out of doors in a well-ventilated area. If you do purchase an alternative heating device, make sure it is approved for use indoors and is listed with the Underwriters Laboratories (UL).

Have plenty of flashlights and extra batteries on hand. Don't use candles for emergency lighting.

Do not open the refrigerator or freezer. A half-full freezer will hold for up to 24 hours and a full freezer for 48. Keep one or more coolers on hand to prolong the shelf life of dairy products, meats, fish, etc.

Be prepared to relocate to a shelter for an extended period of time or if for any other reason local officials request or require that you leave your home. Listen to a battery-operated radio or television for information about where shelters will be available.

If you plan to use a portable generator, connect what you want to power directly to the generator; do not connect the generator to your home's electrical system. Also, be sure to keep a generator in a well-ventilated area either outside or in a garage, keeping the door open. Don't put a generator in your basement or anywhere inside your home.

Power Outage Plans

Create a plan for dealing with long-term power outages. Things to consider:

Before Power Goes Out:

- Fill empty space in freezer with containers of water. Frozen water will displace air and keep food cold longer. Remember to leave space in containers for ice to expand.
- Have at least one phone with a handset cord in your home. Many cordless phones will not work in a power outage.
- If you have an automatic garage door opener, learn how to use the manual release and open your garage door manually.
- Try to keep your car's gas tank at least half full. Many gas stations will not be in operation during a power outage. Fill up your tank if a major storm is predicted.
- Make sure you have a car or lighter plug cord for your cell phone.
- If you have a disability or use special healthcare equipment like oxygen generators or dialysis equipment, notify your power company.

After Power Goes Out:

- Unplug major appliances and electronics. When the power comes back on, there may be power spikes that can damage large appliances or delicate electronics.
- Do not open refrigerators or freezers any more than necessary. An unopened refrigerator will keep food cold for approximately 4 hours, an unopened freezer will keep food frozen for approximately 24 hours.
- Use a battery powered radio to stay informed.

Power Outage Safety

- Discard food if temperature exceeds 40 degrees for more than 2 hours
- Use candles only when absolutely necessary. Always follow safety guidelines.
- Do not use the kitchen range or oven for heat during a power outage.
- Never call 911 to report power outages or to inquire about power restoration. Only call 911 for life threatening emergencies
- Stay away from downed power lines and anything they are in contact with such as fences or buildings.
- Never drive over downed power lines; they may be energized.
- Never use charcoal or gas grills inside a structure. You may be overcome by carbon monoxide.

Using Generators Safely

Using a properly connected generator of adequate size during a power outage will reduce or almost eliminate the impact a power outage has on your life.

When properly connected, generators can:

- Keep your food cold
- Run your well
- Run your furnace
- Power lights, television, radio, and phones

A generator can keep you from having to use your emergency food and water supplies in a power outage and keep you from having to resort to potentially unsafe measures.

The best way to use a portable generator is to connect it to your home using a transfer switch installed by a licensed electrician. This will prevent the power you provide to your home from traveling through wiring that is not designed to handle the load. It will also prevent the power your generator creates from traveling back into the power lines which can injure or kill people working on power lines, or can unexpectedly re-energize downed power lines near your home. You may also connect equipment directly to the outlets on the generator, but be sure that any extension cords are of the proper length and gauge to handle the power requirements.

Always run generators outside. Never use a generator inside a house, in a basement or garage. Never use a cord from a generator to backfeed a circuit in your home. This can cause fires or can cause people working on power lines to be injured or killed.

Being prepared doesn't have to be hard or expensive. By doing one thing a month, you can make sure that you and the people who depend on you will be better prepared for whatever happens.

Generator Tips

Before purchasing a generator, consult an electrician about the size and type to ensure you have adequate power to run the household equipment you require.

Use fuel stabilizer in generator fuel tank when generator is stored for more than 30 days

Always allow generator to cool down before refueling