

# Food Safety and You:

## SAFE FOOD HANDLING FOR DISASTER RELIEF VOLUNTEERS



Louisiana has suffered from numerous natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tropical storms and flooding, including two of the most devastating hurricanes in the nation's history — Katrina and Rita. The catastrophic flood that devastated Louisiana in 2016 was the worst natural disaster to strike the United States since Hurricane Sandy. Massive rescue and recovery efforts were launched by both the government and non-governmental organizations, which provided evacuees with food, clothing, shelter and, most importantly, hope.

Thank you for being a disaster relief volunteer! While you are working under tremendous stress, don't forget about food safety. It is a crucial public health concern that is too often overlooked.

### Why is food safety important during a natural disaster?

- Crowded conditions in shelters can spread foodborne pathogens, especially when vomiting and diarrhea occur.
- Lack of medical support will not allow a quick diagnosis or control of the foodborne illnesses.

### What are the challenges of keeping food safe during a natural disaster?

- Multiple transitions of donated food may lead to temperature abuse.
- Lack of refrigeration.
- Lack of cleaning and sanitizing supplies, including clean water.
- Volunteers who may not be familiar with cooking for large groups and safe food handling.
- Stressful situations may increase the possibility of risk-taking during food preparation.

### Clean water

- It is best to use bottled water or water you have properly prepared and stored as an emergency water supply.

If clean water is not available:

- Boil water for at least one minute. Filter water before boiling if it is cloudy.
- Disinfect water for washing by mixing 8 drops of unscented household bleach in 1 gallon of water. Let it stand for 30 minutes. Double the amount of bleach if the water is cloudy, colored or very cold.
- Disinfection with bleach will kill some, but not all, types of disease-causing organisms that may be in the water.

### Safe food

During a disaster, you probably receive foods from numerous donors. Make sure you have a person in charge of receiving. Store and prepare food safely based on different categories.

#### *Shelf-stable foods (e.g., canned soup)*

- Commercially prepared canned goods or retort pouches are generally at lower risk of foodborne pathogen contamination.
- Store shelf-stable foods in a dry storage area and avoid excessive heat.
- Foods that have been heated should be served immediately.

#### *Foods that need refrigeration (e.g., milk)*

- Be cautious when receiving perishable foods.
- Receive perishable foods at a safe temperature (e.g., receive milk at 45 degrees or below).
- Provide a thermometer for receiving personnel.
- Store perishable foods in the refrigerator until use.

### **Ready-to-eat foods (e.g., turkey sandwich)**

- The receiving personnel should ask about the origin of foods and how they were handled.
- If the food has an abnormal smell or appearance, do not serve it.
- If you have a refrigerator, store food in the refrigerator as soon as it is received and until it is distributed.
- If you do not have a refrigerator, distribute the food as soon as possible and encourage evacuees to consume it immediately.

### **Food allergens (e.g., peanuts)**

- Be cautious of bringing allergens into shelters.
- Be aware of evacuees who have severe food allergen issues.

### **Wash hands**

- Always wash your hands with soap and boiled or disinfected water before preparing food and after restroom use or cleanup activities.
- Use warm water when available.
- If water isn't available, use alcohol-based hand sanitizers.
- Use gloves when handling ready-to-eat foods.
- Avoid barehanded contact with ready-to-eat foods.

### **Be aware of high-risk populations**

- Elderly
- Young children
- Immunocompromised patients
- Pregnant women
- People with injuries
- A natural disaster puts people under great stress, which may make them vulnerable for foodborne illnesses.

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