When the power goes out

Quick reference • 1 of 2 • Print both sides and keep with your supplies.

General U.S. household guidance, not individualized medical or electrical advice. Follow local emergency, utility, and public-health instructions. Call 911 for immediate danger. Do not wait for a checklist or a restoration estimate if your home is unsafe.

1. Check for immediate danger

If you smell gas, hear a carbon monoxide alarm, or see fire, leave immediately. Do not operate switches or use a phone inside a suspected gas leak; call 911 or the gas utility from a safe location. For a CO alarm or symptoms such as headache, dizziness, or nausea, get everyone into fresh air and call 911. Stay away from fallen wires and anything touching them; report them to the utility. Never drive through floodwater.

2. Put medical and temperature needs first

Check anyone using powered medical equipment, oxygen equipment, or refrigerated medicines. Activate their clinician-approved backup and transport plan now; do not wait until a battery is nearly empty. Call 911 for a medical emergency. Move to a confirmed safe, accessible location if heat, cold, or medical needs cannot be managed at home. Never use a gas oven, grill, or camp stove to heat a home.

3. Use safe light and backup power

Use flashlights or battery lanterns instead of candles. Fuel-burning generators belong outdoors only, at least 20 feet from doors, windows, and vents, with exhaust directed away from buildings. Never run one in a garage, even with the door open, or on an enclosed balcony. Use battery-backed CO alarms. Never plug a generator into a wall outlet. Keep it dry, follow its manual, and shut it off and let it cool before refueling.

4. Protect food and record when power failed

Keep refrigerator and freezer doors closed. With doors closed, food stays safe up to 4 hours in a refrigerator, 48 hours in a full freezer, or 24 hours in a half-full freezer. Move perishable refrigerated food to a cooler with ice by 4 hours, maintaining 40°F or below. Discard perishables after 4 hours without power or a cold source. Never taste food to test safety. Frozen food may be refrozen if it still has ice crystals or is 40°F or below.

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5. Check water safety before using the tap

Use safe bottled water if the supply is uncertain, including for drinking, brushing teeth, and food preparation. Follow your water utility's exact advisory. For germs, bring clear water to a rolling boil for 1 minute, or 3 minutes above 6,500 feet; let it cool safely. Boiling does not remove fuel, toxic chemicals, or radioactive contamination. A do-not-use order is not a boil-water order. Do not assume a household filter makes contaminated water safe.

6. Get reliable information and conserve batteries

Report the outage through your utility's official channel if available. Listen to a battery radio and official local alerts. Send brief texts where possible, enable battery-saving mode, and agree on check-in times. Internet, mobile networks, home phones, maps, and card payments may also fail. Use printed contacts and prearranged meeting places. Treat restoration estimates as estimates, not guarantees.

7. Decide whether to stay or leave

Follow evacuation orders promptly. Leave sooner if you cannot safely maintain medical care, drinking water, sanitation, or a safe temperature. Confirm a destination, accessible transport, and pet arrangements when possible; bring medicines, mobility aids, documents, and a go-bag. Check on neighbors by agreement without entering unsafe buildings. Do not assume a listed organization is an open shelter.

8. Restore safely, not all at once

When power returns, check official water and re-entry notices. Do not touch wet electrical equipment or enter a flooded area to reach a breaker. Have damaged wiring assessed by a qualified professional. Reconnect appliances gradually. Check food temperatures and medication storage with a pharmacist; power returning does not make spoiled food or damaged medicine safe again. Restock used supplies and update your plan.

Primary guidance: CDC power outage safety; Ready.gov power outages; CDC food safety and water advisories. Full source URLs appear in the complete guide.

https://www.ready.gov/power-outages | https://www.ready.gov/kit