



An Extended Guide · No. 1777

Block Ice vs. Cubes

Which keeps your
food colder, and when

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! Read this first — when in doubt, throw it out

Here is the one rule that keeps your family safe when the power goes out: when in doubt, throw it out. Keep the refrigerator and freezer doors shut, and know the clock — a closed refrigerator keeps food safe for about 4 hours, and a full freezer holds its cold for about 48 hours (about 24 hours if it is only half full). Any perishable food — meat, poultry, fish, eggs, milk, soft cheese, cut fruit, and leftovers — that has been above 40 degrees Fahrenheit for 2 hours or more should be thrown out. Never taste food to decide whether it is safe; many of the germs that cause food poisoning leave no smell, taste, or change you can see. The right kind of ice can stretch a cooler from hours to days — and that is exactly what this guide will show you how to do.

Not all ice is created equal

Block ice, cubes, even dry ice — the kind you reach for can be the difference between a cooler that lasts a few hours and one that lasts a few days.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. A lot of folks assume ice is just ice, but a frozen block of water and a bag of cubes behave very differently once they are sitting in a cooler. Knowing which one to grab, and when, is one of the simplest ways to protect your food during an outage.

This guide walks through why each kind works the way it does, when to reach for one over the other, and how to make your own ice ahead of time so you are never caught without it.

★ Not sure what to grab right now?

If the power is out and you're standing at the freezer wondering what kind of ice to use, call or text me at (330) 200-8042. I'm glad to help you think it through.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these things, you already know most of what matters.

- ❑ Block ice melts slower and lasts longer — good for the long haul.
- ❑ Cubes cool faster and flow into the gaps around your food.
- ❑ Use both together: block ice for lasting cold, cubes to fill in.
- ❑ Make your own block ice ahead of time by freezing water in clean tubs or jugs.
- ❑ Dry ice is even colder and keeps food frozen, but it needs careful handling.
- ❑ Keep the cooler at 40 degrees or below, and check it with a thermometer.
- ❑ When in doubt, throw it out.

✓ Freeze water ahead of a storm

If weather is coming, fill clean jugs or tubs with water and freeze them now, leaving a little room at the top. Free block ice, ready before you need it.

Why block ice lasts so much longer

It comes down to simple shape, not anything special about the water itself.

A block of ice has a small amount of surface exposed to the warm air around it compared to how much ice is actually inside. Heat can only get in through that outer surface, so a big solid block melts slowly, from the outside in.

That is why a single block of ice can sit in a cooler for a long stretch and still have plenty left at the end, even as the air around it stays warm.

✓ Bigger and solid beats small and scattered

For a long hold, one big block of ice will almost always outlast the same amount of water frozen into a dozen small cubes.

Why cubes cool things down so fast

The very thing that makes cubes melt quickly is also what makes them so good at chilling food in a hurry.

Cubes have a lot of surface area for how much ice they actually contain. All that exposed surface means they soak up heat from the air and the food around them very quickly, which is exactly what you want when you need something cold right now.

Because they are small and loose, cubes also flow into odd-shaped gaps around food in a way a rigid block never could — tucking in around cans, bottles, and containers of every shape.

✓ Cubes for the quick chill-down

If you just filled a cooler with room-temperature drinks or food, a bag of cubes poured around everything will bring the temperature down faster than a single block alone.

The best answer is usually both

Block ice and cubes are not really competing with each other — they are built for two different jobs.

Block ice does the heavy lifting of lasting cold, holding steady for the long stretch of an outage. Cubes do the quick work of chilling things down and filling in every gap around your food. Put them together and you get the strengths of both.

A simple setup works well: a block or two on the bottom, and cubes packed around and on top to fill the gaps and finish the job.

✓ Two kinds, one cooler

There is no rule against mixing ice types in the same cooler. In fact, that is exactly what I recommend for anything longer than a quick trip.

When block ice is the right call

Reach for block ice whenever the cooler needs to hold cold for a long time, not just a few hours.

- A multi-day power outage, where the cooler needs to last.
- A long weekend away from a working fridge, like camping or a cabin.
- Any time you cannot easily get more ice for a while.
- Protecting your most valuable or hardest-to-replace food.

✓ Plan for the outage you might get, not the one you hope for

If there is any chance an outage runs long, start with block ice as your foundation. You can always add cubes later; you cannot make a melted block last longer after the fact.

When cubes are the right call

Reach for cubes when speed matters more than duration, or when odd shapes need filling in.

- Chilling drinks or food down quickly right after you pack the cooler.
- Filling the gaps around cans, bottles, and containers of different shapes.
- Topping off a cooler that already has block ice inside.
- A short outage or a quick trip, where lasting for days is not the goal.

✓ Cubes are the finishing touch

Think of cubes as filling in the last ten percent of the job — the corners and gaps a block alone cannot reach.

Make your own block ice for free

You do not need to buy block ice. A clean container and a few days in the freezer does the job.

Fill a clean tub, jug, or other sealable container with water and set it in the freezer a few days ahead of time. Plastic containers are the right choice, not glass, since glass can crack as the water expands while freezing.

Leave a little headspace at the top of whatever you fill, since water expands as it turns to ice. A container filled all the way to the brim can crack or split as it freezes.

✓ **Homemade is the cheapest cold there is**

A frozen jug of tap water costs you nothing but a little freezer space and a few days of patience — and it works exactly as well as anything you could buy.

Dry ice is a different animal entirely

Dry ice is frozen carbon dioxide, and it is far colder than anything in your freezer — which means it demands real care.

Because dry ice is so much colder than regular ice, it can keep food solidly frozen rather than just cold, which makes it useful for a longer outage. It is not a simple swap for a bag of cubes, though — it comes with its own handling rules.

- Handle it only with insulated gloves — never bare skin, since it can cause a burn instantly.
- Use it only where fresh air is moving through, since it gives off carbon dioxide gas that can build up in a closed car or small room.
- Never seal it inside an airtight container — the gas it releases needs somewhere to go, or pressure can build up.
- Put a layer of cardboard or newspaper between the dry ice and your food.
- Place it on top in a cooler or chest freezer, since cold sinks down from there on its own.
- Ask your dry-ice supplier how much you need and how long it will last — that varies enough to be worth asking directly.

! Worth its own guide

Dry ice is useful, but it deserves a closer look than one page can give it. I've written a whole separate guide just on dry-ice safety for your freezer if you would like the full picture.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

How you stock up on ice looks a little different depending on where you live.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or the suburbs, a store with power is often not far away, so bridging a short outage can be as simple as a quick trip.

- A bag of cubes from a still-powered store nearby can bridge a short outage with no real planning.
- Shorter typical outages mean you may not need a large stockpile of ice at all.
- A small cooler and one or two bags of ice often cover a single fridge and family.
- If outages are common where you live, a few frozen jugs in the freezer save you a store trip entirely.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, the nearest store may be a longer drive, especially if the outage covers a wider area. It pays to make your own block ice ahead of time and keep a real stock on hand.

- Make block ice ahead of time and keep a steady stock in the freezer, since buying more may take longer.
- A bigger household or a large chest freezer of food benefits from more ice on hand, not less.
- If you're on a private well, remember the pump needs power too — the fridge and the well often share the same backup plan.
- A backup thermometer in the cooler is worth it when the next bag of ice is a while away.

★ Somewhere in between?

Tell me how far you are from a store and how long your outages usually run, and I'll help you figure out how much ice to keep on hand. Call (330) 200-8042.

Gel packs and reusable ice

Reusable ice packs are another good option worth keeping in the freezer.

A reusable gel pack works like a tidy, mess-free stand-in for a block of ice. It will not melt into a puddle in the bottom of the cooler, and once the outage is over, you simply refreeze it and put it away for next time.

They are not usually meant to replace a full supply of ice for a long outage, but they are a handy addition — especially for smaller coolers or for keeping a single item steadily cool.

✓ Keep a couple in the freezer year-round

Reusable packs take up little space and are ready to go the moment you need them, with no melting mess to clean up afterward.

A word of caution on salt and ice

You may have heard that adding salt to ice makes it colder. That's true — but it is not usually what you want in a cooler.

Salt lowers the temperature at which ice melts, which is why it is used to make old-fashioned ice cream or to clear icy sidewalks. Mixed with ice, it can pull the temperature down well below the freezing point of plain water.

That extra cold can be too much of a good thing in a cooler. It can freeze or damage delicate food sitting right next to it, and it simply is not necessary for keeping food safe. For a cooler, plain ice held at 40 degrees or below is what you actually want.

! Keep it simple: plain ice, not salted

Save the salt-and-ice trick for making ice cream on a summer afternoon. For food safety in a cooler, plain block ice and cubes do the job without the risk.

Whatever ice you use, the thermometer is the judge

Block, cubes, dry ice, gel packs — none of it matters if you are not checking the actual temperature.

The goal is always the same: keep the cooler at 40 degrees or below. A cooler thermometer takes the guesswork out of it completely, and it costs only a couple of dollars.

Check it now and then through the outage, and add more ice well before it runs low. It is much easier to keep a cooler cold than to bring a warm one back down.

! 40 degrees or below, no matter the ice

This is the number that matters, not which kind of ice got you there. Keep a thermometer in the cooler and trust the reading over a guess.

Store-bought or homemade — both work fine

There is no wrong answer between buying ice and making your own. It mostly comes down to convenience and planning ahead.

A bag of ice from the store is quick and easy when you need it right now and a nearby store still has power. Homemade block ice, frozen in your own freezer days ahead of time, costs you nothing but a little patience and freezer space.

If you know ahead of time that weather is coming, homemade block ice is the cheapest option there is. If an outage catches you by surprise, a store run is a perfectly good plan too.

✓ A little of both is a fine plan

Keep a few homemade blocks in the freezer as your everyday backup, and treat a store trip as your plan for topping off cubes when you need them.

Keeping the cooler going during an outage

Once the outage is underway, the job becomes simple upkeep — refresh the ice, and keep the lid down.

As ice melts, drain off the water if it is pooling and add more ice to keep the level up. A cooler that is kept full of ice holds its cold far better than one that is running low.

Just like the fridge and freezer, every time you open the cooler you let cold out and warm air in. Open it with a plan, grab what you need, and close it back up.

✓ A full cooler is a cold cooler

The same rule that helps a fridge or freezer applies here too: a cooler packed with food and ice holds its temperature longer than one that is mostly empty air.

When the power comes back on

Do not let the ice you made go to waste once the outage ends.

Refill and refreeze any jugs or tubs you used for block ice, and restock your gel packs in the freezer. Future you, during the next outage, will be glad they are already sitting there ready to go.

Check your cooler and fridge thermometers before assuming everything survived, and follow the usual food-safety rules for what to keep and what to toss.

✓ Reset your stash right away

It is tempting to put this off once the power is back, but refreezing your jugs the same day means you are ready again almost immediately.

Common mistakes people make with ice

A handful of avoidable slip-ups explain most of the coolers that warm up faster than they should.

- **Using only cubes for a long hold**, when a block would have lasted so much longer.
- **Letting the ice fully melt** before adding more, instead of topping it off along the way.
- **Packing too little ice** for how long the outage might actually run.
- **Skipping the thermometer** and guessing whether the cooler is cold enough.
- **Assuming all ice is equal**, when block, cubes, and dry ice each do a different job.

! The costliest mistake is running out early

A cooler that runs out of ice partway through a long outage is often worse off than one planned ahead of time with the right mix from the start.

Keep a ready stash of ice year-round

The best time to think about ice is long before an outage, not in the middle of one.

Keep a few frozen jugs of water and a bag or two of ice tucked into your freezer at all times, even when there is no storm in the forecast. They take up space you were not using anyway, and they do double duty helping your freezer stay full.

When an outage does hit, you are not starting from zero — you already have a head start sitting right there in the freezer.

✓ Rotate it like anything else

Use your stashed ice now and then for a cooler on a regular trip, then refreeze a replacement. That way it never sits forgotten and you know it is always ready.

Ice vs backup power: which do you need?

Ice and coolers handle most outages just fine. Backup power is worth a look only if yours tend to run long or happen often.

For a typical outage of a few hours to a day or two, block ice, cubes, and a good cooler will carry your food through without much trouble. It is simple, cheap, and needs no equipment beyond what is already in your freezer.

If your outages run longer or happen more often, backup power for the fridge itself starts to make sense. A gas generator makes plenty of power, but it must run outdoors only, well away from the house, since its exhaust carries carbon monoxide — an invisible gas that can kill in minutes. A battery or solar power station makes no exhaust at all.

✓ A battery power station is safe to use indoors

Unlike a gas generator, a battery or solar power station makes no exhaust and no carbon monoxide, so it is safe to run inside the house right next to the refrigerator. A gas generator is the opposite — it must always run outdoors, well away from doors, windows, and vents.

Print this page and stick it on the fridge

Keep this where you will actually see it before you pack a cooler.

- ☐ Block ice for lasting cold — best for a long outage.
- ☐ Cubes for a fast chill — and to fill the gaps.
- ☐ Use both together for the best of each.
- ☐ Keep the cooler at 40 degrees or below.
- ☐ Make your own block ice ahead of time — it is free.

★ Keep my number nearby too

Tape my number right next to this checklist: (330) 200-8042. If you're ever unsure which ice to use, a quick call costs you nothing.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most often about picking the right ice.

Q: Which lasts longer, block ice or cubes?

Block ice, by a good margin. It has less surface area for its size, so warm air has less to work with and it melts slowly from the outside in. Cubes melt much faster because there is so much more surface exposed.

Q: Can I really make block ice myself at home?

Yes, and it costs you nothing but time. Fill a clean plastic tub or jug with water, leave room at the top for it to expand, and freeze it a few days ahead of time.

Q: Should I add salt to make my ice colder?

Not for a cooler. Salt does make ice colder, but that extra cold can freeze or damage food sitting nearby. For food safety, plain ice kept at 40 degrees or below is all you need.

Q: How much ice do I actually need?

Enough to keep the cooler at 40 degrees or below for as long as you expect the outage to last, with a full cooler holding cold longer than a half-empty one. When you're not sure, a little extra ice is always the safer bet.

Q: What about dry ice — is it worth using?

It can be, especially for a longer outage, since it is far colder than regular ice. But it needs careful handling — gloves, fresh air, and never an airtight container — so it is worth reading up before you use it.

★ Still have a question?

Picking the right ice comes up in a lot of the calls I get during an outage. I'm always glad to talk it through — call or text me at (330) 200-8042.

You don't have to do this alone

You just have to remember that a friendly, patient person is one call away.

I hope this guide made choosing the right ice to protect your food feel a little less daunting and a lot more doable. Keep it in a drawer with your other home papers, come back to a page whenever you need it, and don't worry about memorizing anything.

When you'd rather have a hand, that's exactly what I do. I come to your home, work at your pace, and never make you feel rushed or silly for asking. A first visit is a flat \$99, and for the parts that don't need me on-site I can often help right on your screen for \$49. Every visit comes with a 30-day, come-back-free guarantee. I don't do the licensed electrical or gas work myself — for that I'll help you line up a trustworthy local pro.

★ Bill's Home Tech — real help, close to home

Call or text me at (330) 200-8042, or visit BillsHomeTech.com. Serving Atwater and all of Portage County. 30+ years of patient, plain-English tech help — and if you're ever not 100% happy with a visit, I'll make it right or refund it. That's a promise. — Bill

Block Ice vs Cubes

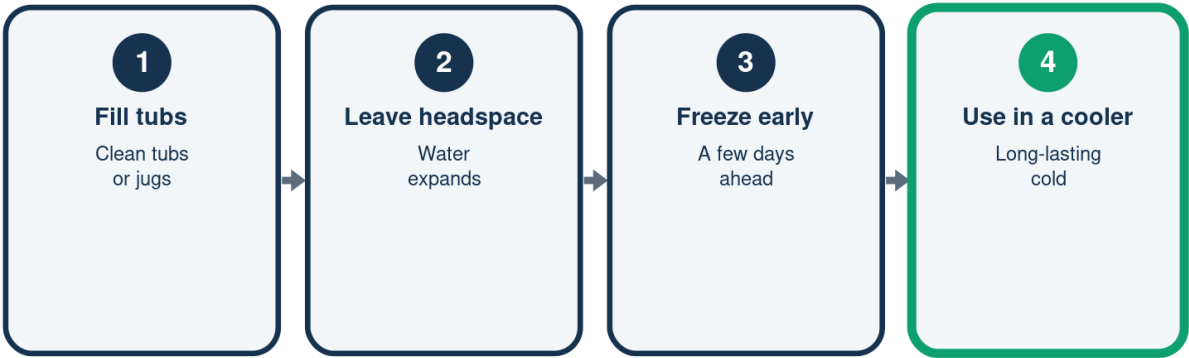
Two kinds, two jobs

	Best For	Why
Block ice	Lasting cold	Melts slower
Cubes	Fast chill	More surface
A mix	Both jobs	Fill and last
Dry ice	Keeping frozen	Coldest, careful

Block for duration, cubes to fill – use both.

Make Your Own Block Ice

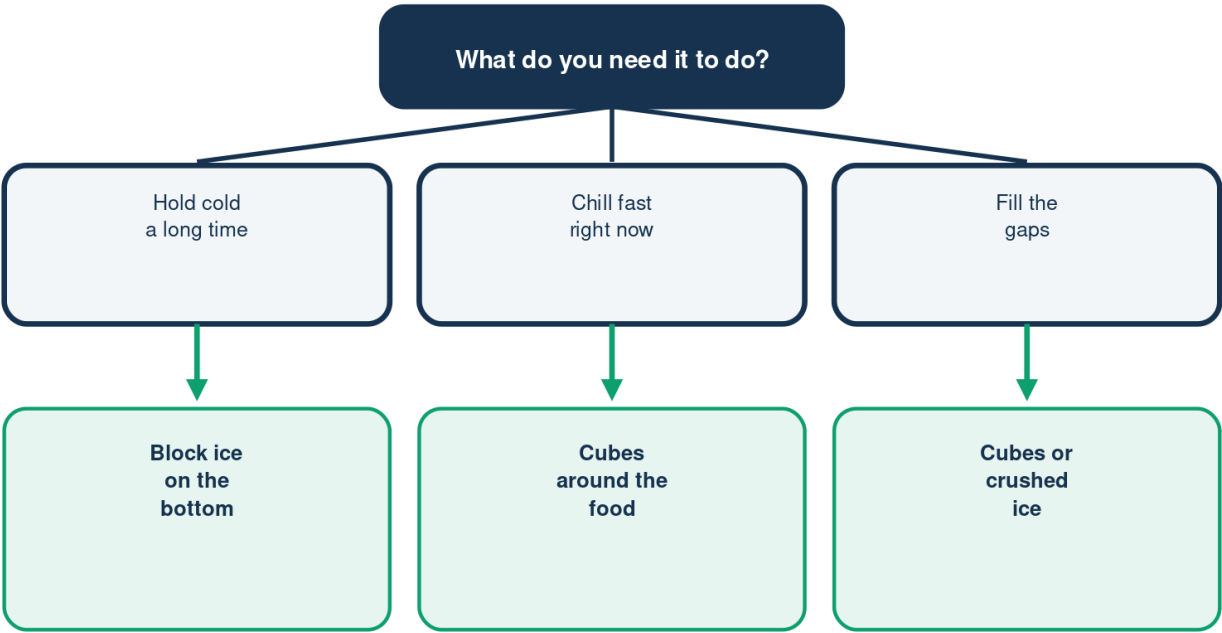
Free, if you plan ahead



Homemade block ice is the cheapest cold there is.

Which Ice Do I Want?

Match the ice to the job

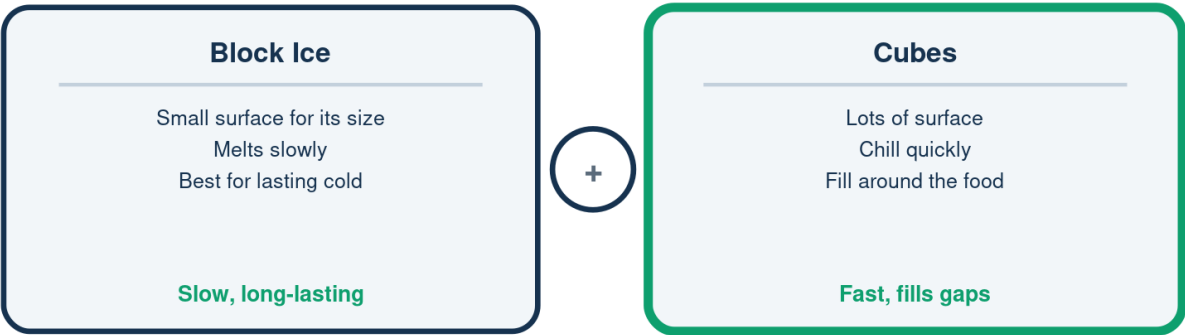


Whatever you use, keep the cooler at 40 degrees or below.

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.

Block vs Cube

Surface area is the secret



Use both -- block on the bottom, cubes to fill -- and hold 40 or below.

The right mix beats either one alone.



Need a Real Person?

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— Bill

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A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill.

I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that comes from using these guides. Thanks for reading, and stay safe out there.

— *Bill*



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