



An Extended Guide · No. 1775

Coolers and Ice as Backup

Your simplest outage
backup, no wiring needed

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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. Long before you think about a generator, a good cooler and some ice carry most outages.

Your simplest backup is probably in the garage

When the power goes out, you don't need to reach for a generator right away. A good cooler and a bag of ice can protect a fridge's worth of food, and most people already own one.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. Of everything I recommend for outage backup, the humble cooler is the simplest — no wiring, no fuel, no learning curve. You fill it with ice, move the right food into it, and you're covered for most outages that come along.

This guide walks through exactly how to use a cooler and ice as your first line of defense, so it's ready before you ever need it.

★ New to all this?

If you're just getting started on an outage plan, don't overthink it. A cooler and some ice, done right, solve most of the problem. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 if you'd like to talk it through.

The whole guide, on one page

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

- ❑ Move fridge perishables to a cooler after about 4 hours without power, or right away if your ice is ready.
- ❑ Keep the cooler at 40 degrees or below.
- ❑ Keep a thermometer in the cooler, not just a guess.
- ❑ A full cooler holds cold longer than a half-empty one.
- ❑ Block ice lasts longer; cubes cool fast and fill the gaps.
- ❑ When in doubt, throw it out.

✓ Freeze your ice before you need it

Fill jugs, bags, or clean tubs with water and freeze them ahead of time. Free block ice, ready whenever the power isn't.

When to move food to the cooler

Timing is simple: you've got a window before the fridge needs backup, and the cooler is how you use it.

A closed refrigerator keeps food safe for about 4 hours. If the power's been out that long, or looks likely to be, that's your cue to move the fridge's perishable food into an iced cooler rather than waiting to see what happens.

If you already have ice on hand and ready to go, there's no reason to wait out the 4 hours at all. Moving perishables into a cold cooler right away only helps — it just means you start the clock on ice instead of on a slowly warming fridge.

✓ Write down when the power went out

A sticky note with the time is worth a lot here. It tells you exactly when your 4-hour window opened, instead of leaving you to guess.

What goes in the cooler first

Not everything in the fridge needs the cooler. The fragile items do.

Meat, milk, eggs, and leftovers are the perishable foods that spoil fastest once they warm up, and they're the ones the 2-hour and 4-hour rules are really about. These go into the cooler first, packed in and surrounded by ice.

Hardier items — many condiments, hard cheeses, whole uncut produce — can usually ride out a warm spell in the fridge itself, so save your cooler space and ice for the foods that truly need it.

! When it's been too long, let it go

Any perishable food that's been above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more should be thrown out, cooler or no cooler. When in doubt, throw it out.

Keep the cooler at 40 degrees or below

The cooler only does its job if it actually stays cold enough — and the only way to know that is to check.

Slip an appliance thermometer into the cooler right along with the food. Forty degrees or below is the target, same as the fridge, and it's what keeps the bacteria that cause food poisoning from taking hold.

Add ice as it melts to hold that line. A cooler that's merely cold to the touch isn't the same as one that's reading 40 or below — trust the number, not your hand.

✓ One thermometer, always in the cooler

Keep a spare thermometer stored with your cooler gear so it's already there when you need it, instead of hunting for one mid-outage.

A full cooler holds cold longer

The same trick that makes a full freezer outlast a half-empty one works in a cooler too.

Pack the cooler snugly, with food and ice close together and as little empty air as possible. Air is what warms up fastest, so the less of it inside, the longer your cold lasts.

Fill any gaps with extra ice or even a folded towel. A tightly packed cooler that's mostly ice and food will hold its temperature far longer than one with food rattling around loose.

✓ Top it off before you close the lid

Once the food's arranged, tuck ice into every remaining gap. It only takes a minute and it buys real hours.

Block ice or cubes? Use both

The two kinds of ice do two different jobs, and together they cover both.

Block ice melts slowly, so it lasts longer — it's the ice you want doing the long, steady work of keeping the cooler cold for hours or days. Cubes melt faster, but they chill things quickly and pack into every gap around your food.

A mix of both is ideal: block ice for lasting cold, cubes to fill in and cool fast. I've written a whole separate guide comparing block ice and cubes if you want the full picture.

✓ Make your own block ice

Freeze water in plastic jugs, bags, or clean tubs ahead of time. It costs nothing and outlasts a bag of store-bought cubes.

Where you put the cooler matters

The same cooler and the same ice will last very different lengths of time depending on where you set it.

Find the coolest, shadiest spot you have — an interior room, a basement, or at least a spot away from windows the sun pours through. A cooler sitting in direct sunlight or a warm kitchen will lose its ice far faster than one tucked into shade.

If the weather's part of the outage, that's one more reason a shaded, indoor spot beats a porch or a sunny garage.

✓ Keep it off hot floors and pavement

A cool tile floor or basement floor is a better resting spot than pavement or a floor warmed by sun through a window.

Consider a second cooler for drinks and snacks

The food cooler does its best work when it's opened as rarely as possible — and a second cooler is how you make that easy.

Keep a separate, smaller cooler with ice for the drinks and grab-and-go snacks everyone will want throughout the day. That way, thirsty kids or a quick snack run don't mean opening the cooler that's protecting your meat, milk, and leftovers.

It's the same idea as keeping a drinks cooler by the back door so the main fridge stays shut — just carried over to your outage plan.

✓ Label them if it helps

If it keeps the wrong cooler from getting opened for the wrong reason, a strip of tape and a marker is all it takes.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

How far a cooler and some ice carry you depends a little on where you live.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or the suburbs, a store with power usually isn't far away, so a cooler plus a bag of ice from that store often bridges a short outage with no trouble at all.

- A nearby, still-powered store means restocking ice is usually quick and easy.
- One cooler is often plenty for a single kitchen fridge's worth of perishables.
- Shorter typical outages mean the cooler rarely has to work for very long.
- Keep a small stash of ice in the freezer anyway, so you're not caught without any.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, the nearest store with ice may be a longer drive, and there's often more food at stake — so keeping a bigger stock of ice on hand ahead of time matters more. If you're on a private well, remember the pump needs power too, so the cooler is one piece of a bigger backup plan.

- Keep more ice in reserve, since a supply run may mean a longer drive.
- A bigger household or a second freezer may mean packing more than one cooler.
- A well pump sharing the outage means water for drinking and cleaning is part of the same plan.
- Frozen jugs pull double duty — they hold cold in the freezer, then become cooler ice when you need it.

★ Not sure how much ice is enough?

Tell me what you're protecting and how far you are from the nearest store, and I'll help you figure out a stock of ice and coolers that fits your home. Call (330) 200-8042.

Make your own ice before the storm

The best time to make ice is before you need it — and it costs you nothing but freezer space.

When a storm's in the forecast, fill clean plastic jugs, freezer bags, or tubs with water and freeze them solid. Leave a little room at the top of each one, since water expands as it freezes.

These homemade blocks do double duty: they help fill and cool an emptier freezer while the power's on, and they become free block ice the moment you need to pack a cooler.

✓ A few jugs, made ahead, go a long way

You don't need anything fancy — a handful of frozen jugs tucked in the freezer is real insurance against a storm that knocks the power out.

Dry ice: colder, stronger, and needs care

For a freezer under real strain, dry ice is a much stronger option than regular ice — but it comes with rules you need to follow.

Dry ice is frozen carbon dioxide, and it's far colder than regular ice. Handle it only with insulated gloves, never bare skin, and use it only in a ventilated space — it gives off carbon dioxide gas that can build up in a closed car or small room.

Never seal it in an airtight container, since pressure can build and burst it. Put a layer of cardboard or newspaper between it and your food, and place it on top of a chest freezer or cooler, since cold sinks. For how much to use and how long it lasts, ask your dry-ice supplier — I've written a full guide on dry-ice safety if you'd like more detail.

! Dry ice is not the generator danger

Dry ice gives off carbon dioxide, not the carbon monoxide from a gas generator — but it deserves its own careful handling. Gloves, ventilation, and a barrier from food, every time.

What to do about the melt water

Ice doesn't stay ice forever, and the water left behind is actually still useful — if you handle it right.

Cold water sitting in the bottom of the cooler still chills whatever's touching it, so you don't have to drain it away the moment ice turns to water. The key is keeping your food dry inside it.

Seal meat, leftovers, and other perishables in sealed bags or containers before they go in, so they can sit right in that cold water without getting waterlogged or contaminated. Drain the cooler and add fresh ice once the water's no longer doing much good.

✓ A drain plug makes this easy

Many coolers have a drain plug for exactly this reason. If yours does, use it to top up with fresh ice without unpacking everything first.

Treat the cooler like the fridge

Once your food's moved into the cooler, the same rule that protects a fridge applies here too: keep it shut.

Open the cooler as little as you'd open the fridge during an outage — decide what you need before you lift the lid, grab it, and close it back up. Every open lets cold out and warm air in, just like a fridge door.

This is exactly why a second cooler for drinks and snacks helps so much: it keeps hands out of the cooler that's protecting your meat, milk, and leftovers.

✓ Group what you'll need

Keep items you're likely to want together near the top, so a single quick open covers more ground.

When the power comes back on

Getting the lights back doesn't mean the job's done — there's one more step before food goes back in the fridge.

Once the fridge has had a chance to cool back down to 40 degrees or below, check it with a thermometer before moving food back in. Do the same check on the food that was in the cooler.

If anything sat above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more along the way, follow the same rule as always: when in doubt, throw it out. Otherwise, food that stayed at 40 or below the whole time is fine to return to the fridge.

✓ Refill your frozen jugs

Once things are back to normal, refill and refreeze any jugs you used for ice. Future-you will be glad they're ready for next time.

Common mistakes people make

A handful of avoidable slip-ups are behind most of the coolers that fail when they're needed most.

- **Starting with a warm cooler**, instead of pre-chilling it with ice before the food goes in.
- **Packing too little ice**, which lets the cooler warm up far faster than expected.
- **Setting the cooler in a sunny spot**, where heat undoes all that ice's work.
- **Opening it constantly** to check on things, letting cold escape every time.
- **Forgetting a thermometer**, and trusting a guess instead of a number.

! A cooler is only as good as its ice and its lid

Pack it cold, pack it full, keep it shut, and keep a thermometer in it. Skip any one of those and you're gambling with food safety.

What to look for in a cooler

You don't need anything fancy, but a few features make a real difference in how long the cold lasts.

A thicker-walled, well-insulated cooler holds its temperature far longer than a thin, inexpensive one. Look for a snug, well-sealed lid — that's where most of the cold escapes if it fits poorly.

Size matters too: big enough to hold your fridge's most perishable items packed in snugly with ice, but not so big that it's mostly empty air. I'll keep this general rather than point you toward any particular brand — wall thickness and a good seal are what to judge by, whatever you're looking at.

✓ A second, smaller cooler is worth owning

One larger cooler for perishables, plus a smaller one for drinks and snacks, covers most households well.

Keep a cooler kit ready to go

The best cooler in the world doesn't help if you're hunting for it, and the ice, when the power's already out.

Store your cooler (or coolers), a dedicated thermometer, and a stash of frozen water jugs together, or at least where you know exactly where to find them. That way, the moment you need them, there's no searching involved.

- ❑ A cooler, or two, cleaned and ready.
- ❑ A thermometer, stored with the cooler.
- ❑ Frozen water jugs or ice packs in the freezer.
- ❑ A few sealed bags or containers for perishables.

✓ Check the kit twice a year

A quick check each spring and fall — ice refrozen, cooler clean, thermometer working — means it's always ready when a storm rolls in.

! Read this first — carbon monoxide is the real danger

A running gas generator's exhaust contains carbon monoxide — an invisible, odorless gas that can kill in minutes. Never run a gas generator indoors, in a garage, in a shed, or on a porch, not even with the door open and a fan going. Run it outside only, well away from the house — the safety agencies say at least 20 feet — with the exhaust pointed away from every window, door, and vent. Put battery-backup carbon-monoxide alarms on each floor and outside the bedrooms. A battery or solar power station is the safe indoor alternative — it makes no exhaust at all. A cooler and ice handle most outages just fine — backup power is only for the ones that run long or happen often.

If your outages run long or often

Coolers and ice cover the vast majority of outages, but if yours tend to stretch on, it may be worth keeping the fridge itself powered.

There are two main paths. A gas generator makes plenty of power but must run outdoors only, well away from the house, because its exhaust carries deadly carbon monoxide. A battery or solar power station makes no exhaust and is safe indoors, right next to the fridge.

✓ 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.

Either way, sizing it right starts with the appliance's own nameplate, not a guess — I've written separate guides on running a fridge on a generator, on a battery station, and on sizing backup power if you want to go further.

Print this page and stick it on the fridge

Keep this where you'll see it during an outage — right on the fridge door is a fine choice.

- ☐ Power out? Cooler and ice, ready to go.
- ☐ Keep the cooler at 40 degrees or below.
- ☐ Thermometer in the cooler, not just a guess.
- ☐ Keep it shut — open only when you must.
- ☐ When in doubt, throw it out.

★ Keep my number nearby too

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

Common Questions

The questions I hear most often about using a cooler and ice as backup.

Q: Do I really not need a generator?

For most outages, no. A cooler with ice, used right, protects a fridge's worth of food through the great majority of outages. A generator or battery station only starts to earn its keep once outages run long or happen often.

Q: How much ice do I actually need?

There's no single number — it depends on the cooler, the outage, and how warm it is. A good habit is to keep more on hand than you think you'll need, with a mix of block ice and cubes, and add more as it melts.

Q: What goes in the cooler first?

The fragile perishables: meat, poultry, milk, eggs, and leftovers. Hardier items like condiments and hard cheese can often stay in the fridge a while longer.

Q: Where should I keep the cooler during an outage?

The coolest, shadiest spot in the house — away from sunny windows and off hot pavement. A shaded interior room or a basement is ideal.

Q: Should I drain the water as the ice melts?

Not right away — cold water still chills food, as long as that food is in sealed bags or containers. Drain and refill with fresh ice once the water isn't doing much good anymore.

★ Still have a question?

Cooler and ice questions come up all the time, and 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 using a cooler and 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.

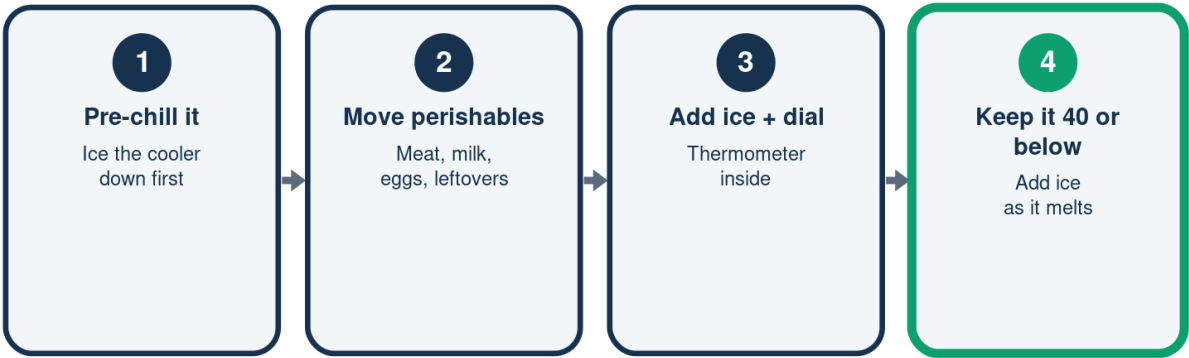
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Cooler Backup, Step by Step

No wiring, no fuss



A cooler and ice carry most outages -- keep it shut.

What Goes in the Cooler First

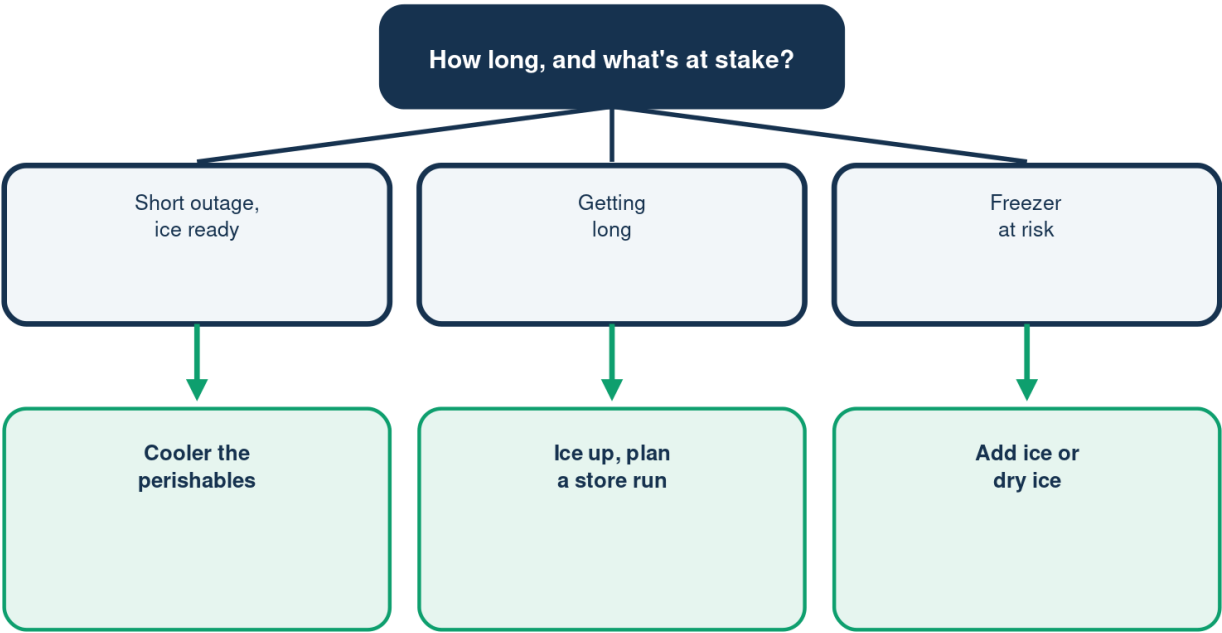
Protect the fragile foods

	Into the Cooler	Can Wait
Meat and poultry	Yes, first	--
Milk and eggs	Yes, first	--
Leftovers	Yes, first	--
Condiments	--	Usually fine

Keep the cooler at 40 degrees or below.

Cooler, or Ride It Out?

Match the plan to the outage



A closed fridge buys about 4 hours before you must act.

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

Block Ice vs Cubes

Two jobs, two kinds

	Best For	Note
Block ice	Lasting cold	Melts slower
Cubes	Fast chill	Fill the gaps
A mix	Both jobs	Ideal
Either way	40 or below	Add as it melts

Make your own block ice ahead by freezing jugs.



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A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill.

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— *Bill*



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