



An Extended Guide · No. 1771

# What to Toss and What to Keep

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A calm list for after  
the power's back

**Tech Made Simple — Service Made Personal**

[BillsHomeTech.com](http://BillsHomeTech.com) · (330) 200-8042 · Atwater, Ohio

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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. This guide is the calm sorting list for when the lights come back on — what to toss without a second thought, and what you can trust to keep.

## Let's sort the fridge and freezer, calmly

The power's back on. Before you restock, a few minutes of calm sorting saves both food and worry.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. Once the lights come back on, I get almost as many calls as during the outage itself — this time it's 'Bill, what do I do with all this food?' There's a short, reliable way to answer that, not a guessing game.

You don't need to sniff, taste, or agonize over every item. A handful of simple rules sort almost everything in your fridge and freezer into a keep pile and a toss pile, fast.

**★ Sorting together over the phone**

If you'd rather talk it through while you stand at the open fridge, call or text me at (330) 200-8042. I'm glad to help you sort, no charge.

## The whole guide, on one page

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

- ❑ Check the thermometer first, in both the fridge and the freezer.
- ❑ Any perishable food above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more: throw it out.
- ❑ Hard, shelf-stable items usually keep through a warm spell.
- ❑ Freezer food with ice crystals, or at 40 degrees or below: safe to keep.
- ❑ Never taste food to decide if it's safe.
- ❑ When in doubt, throw it out.

### ✓ Let the thermometer decide

A reading beats a memory every time. If you kept a thermometer in the fridge and freezer, check it before you touch anything — it turns this whole page into simple math.

## The one test that decides everything

Every toss-or-keep decision in this guide comes back to a single test.

Here it is: if a perishable food has been above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more, discard it. That's the whole test. It doesn't matter how it looks, how it smells, or how much you hate to waste it.

Perishables are the fragile foods: meat, poultry, fish and seafood, milk, soft cheeses, eggs, cooked leftovers, and cut fruits or vegetables. These are exactly the foods that bacteria multiply in fastest once they warm up.

Everything else in this guide — the toss lists, the keep lists — is just this one test applied item by item. Learn the test, and you already understand the whole guide.

### **! Above 40, 2 hours or more: gone**

This is the test worth memorizing: perishable and above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more means discard. When you're not sure, treat it as though it failed the test.

## Toss list: meat, poultry, and seafood

These are some of the most fragile foods in the kitchen, raw or cooked.

Any meat, poultry, or seafood — raw or already cooked — that has been above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more should be thrown out, no exceptions.

| Food                          | If Warm 2+ Hrs |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Raw meat, poultry, seafood    | Discard        |
| Cooked meat, poultry, seafood | Discard        |
| Lunch meat, hot dogs, bacon   | Discard        |
| Any meat-based sauce or dish  | Discard        |

**! Never taste to check**

Meat, poultry, and seafood are exactly where dangerous bacteria grow fastest. When you're not sure, don't taste it — toss it.

## Toss list: dairy and eggs

Dairy and eggs spoil quickly once they warm, and they deserve their own careful look.

Milk, cream, yogurt, soft cheeses, eggs, and egg dishes that have been above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more should all be thrown out.

| Food                        | If Warm 2+ Hrs |
|-----------------------------|----------------|
| Milk, cream, yogurt         | Discard        |
| Soft cheeses                | Discard        |
| Eggs, in shell or out       | Discard        |
| Egg dishes, quiche, custard | Discard        |

✓ **Hard cheese is a different story**

Hard and processed cheeses hold up far better than soft ones — you'll find them on the keep list a few pages ahead.

## Toss list: leftovers and cut produce

Anything already cooked or already cut loses its natural protection the moment it warms up.

Cooked leftovers and casseroles, cut or peeled fruit, cut cooked vegetables, and cooked pasta or rice all follow the same rule: above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more, they go.

| Food                         | If Warm 2+ Hrs |
|------------------------------|----------------|
| Cooked leftovers, casseroles | Discard        |
| Cut or peeled fruit          | Discard        |
| Cut, cooked vegetables       | Discard        |
| Cooked pasta, rice, grains   | Discard        |

**! When in doubt, let it go**

If you can't remember how long a dish sat out, or whether it crossed the line, treat it as unsafe. A tossed meal is a small loss.

## Keep list: hard cheeses and butter

Not everything in the dairy drawer is fragile — some of it is surprisingly tough.

Hard and processed cheeses carry much less moisture than soft cheeses, and butter and margarine are similarly hardy, so they generally ride out a warm spell far better.

- Hard and processed cheeses — cheddar, Parmesan, Swiss, sliced American — usually keep.
- Butter and margarine usually keep as well.
- These hold up because they carry much less moisture than soft cheese, milk, or cut produce.
- Still not sure about a specific piece of cheese or butter? When in doubt, throw it out.

### ✓ Why the difference?

Curious why hard cheese holds up so much better than soft cheese? I explain it in plain terms a couple of pages ahead.

## Keep list: whole produce and breads

Whole, uncut foods protect themselves far better than food that has already been cut or cooked.

Whole fruits and vegetables, breads, rolls, muffins, and cakes without cream usually keep through a warm spell without concern.

- Whole, uncut fruits usually keep.
- Raw, whole vegetables usually keep.
- Breads, rolls, and muffins usually keep.
- Cakes without cream filling or cream frosting usually keep.

### ✓ Cutting changes the rule

The moment you slice into a whole fruit or vegetable, it moves off this list and onto the toss-if-warm one. Whole and uncut is what protects it.

## Keep list: condiments and shelf-stable items

Your condiment shelf is tougher than almost anything else in the fridge.

Ketchup, mustard, relish, olives, peanut butter, jam or jelly, and unopened juices are shelf-stable by design, so the fridge is mostly just keeping them at their best.

- Ketchup, mustard, and relish usually keep.
- Olives, peanut butter, and jam or jelly usually keep.
- Unopened juices usually keep.
- Most of these are shelf-stable by design — the fridge just keeps them at their best.

### ✓ One less thing to worry about

Save your worry for the toss list. Condiments and shelf-stable items are rarely the reason to second-guess a sort.

## Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

Sorting after an outage looks a little different depending on where you live and what's at stake.

### If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or the suburbs, you're usually sorting one fridge's worth of food, and help is rarely far away.

- A single fridge and maybe one freezer keeps the sorting quick.
- A neighbor or family member nearby can lend a hand, or a cooler, if you need one.
- A store with power is usually close if you need to restock right away.
- The one-test rule — above 40 for 2+ hours — gets you through the whole fridge in a few minutes.

### If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, there's often a lot more at stake — a big chest freezer full of meat or a season's harvest, sometimes a second fridge in the garage. If you're on a private well, remember the pump shares the same backup plan as the fridge.

- Sort the freezer by ice crystals — if they're still there, or the food reads 40 degrees or below, it's safe to keep.
- A full chest freezer of meat is worth protecting carefully; work through it methodically rather than all at once.
- If your well pump also needs backup power, the fridge and freezer are sharing that plan — sort with that in mind.
- Help may be farther away, so a thermometer and a clear head matter even more.

#### ★ Sorting a freezer full of meat?

If you're standing in front of a big chest freezer wondering where to start, call or text me at (330) 200-8042. I'll help you sort it methodically, no charge.

## Why soft and hard cheese play by different rules

One simple fact explains the whole cheese drawer.

Soft cheeses — brie, ricotta, cream cheese, fresh mozzarella — hold a lot of moisture, and moisture is exactly what bacteria need to grow fast, so soft cheeses spoil quickly once they warm up.

Hard cheeses — cheddar, Parmesan, Swiss — hold much less moisture. That's what lets them resist spoiling and usually keep through a warm spell that would ruin a soft cheese.

### ✓ One quick way to sort it

Soft and moist: treat it like the toss list. Hard and dry: treat it like the keep list. Still not sure which one you're holding? When in doubt, throw it out.

## The freezer plays by its own rules

Don't judge the freezer by the same clock as the fridge — look at the food itself.

If freezer food still has ice crystals, or reads 40 degrees or below on a thermometer, it's safe to refreeze or cook, even if the texture changes a little.

I've written a whole separate guide on refreezing food that goes deeper into this question if you'd like the full picture.

### ✓ Ice crystals are your green light

Visible ice crystals in a package, or a thermometer reading 40 degrees or below, is the clearest signal you have that freezer food is still safe.

## Label and date everything

A few seconds with a marker turns confusion into clarity, especially for the freezer.

As you sort, mark anything you're keeping with the date of the outage. If you refreeze food that partly thawed, that label will help you decide how soon to use it.

This habit pays off even more the next time the power goes out, because you'll already know the drill.

### ✓ Keep a marker and tape handy

Stash them in a kitchen drawer near the fridge, so labeling is a ten-second habit instead of a search for supplies.

## The order of operations when power returns

Having the steps in your head ahead of time turns sorting into a calm routine.

- ❑ Check the thermometer in the fridge and freezer first.
- ❑ Sort the freezer first: ice crystals or 40 or below means keep.
- ❑ Move to the fridge: apply the one test to every perishable item.
- ❑ Set aside anything you're unsure about rather than guessing.
- ❑ Label anything you keep with the outage date.
- ❑ When in doubt, throw it out.

### ★ Want a hand sorting?

If you'd rather not do this alone, call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and I'll walk you through it.

## Medicine and baby formula are a different question

These deserve their own moment of thought — please don't sort them by the same rules as food.

Refrigerated medicine, insulin included, doesn't follow the food-safety rules in this guide. How long it can safely sit warm varies by medicine, so your pharmacist or doctor is the right person to ask, not a general guide like this one.

Infant formula and breast milk also have their own careful handling rules. When in doubt about either one, lean on a professional rather than guessing.

### **! Medicine questions go to your pharmacist**

I can help you set up a cooler and a thermometer, but I'm not a medical professional. For whether a specific medicine is still good, please call your pharmacist or doctor.

## Common mistakes people make while sorting

A handful of avoidable slip-ups explain most of the food that gets tossed unnecessarily, or eaten when it shouldn't be.

- **Tasting food to check it** — please don't. You can't taste the germs that make you sick.
- **Keeping warm dairy because it smells fine**, when smell can't tell you what matters.
- **Tossing safe hard cheese needlessly**, when it likely belongs on the keep list.
- **Ignoring the thermometer** and going with a guess instead.
- **Not labeling what you keep**, which turns the next outage into a repeat guessing game.

### **! The costliest mistake is the confident guess**

Almost every food-poisoning case I hear about starts with someone feeling sure a food was probably okay. The rules in this guide exist so you never have to rely on a hopeful guess.

## When you truly can't tell

Sometimes you won't have a thermometer reading or a clear sense of how long the power was out, and that's still okay.

If you don't know how long a perishable food sat above 40 degrees, or you have no thermometer reading to go on, treat it as unsafe. It's a small loss compared to the alternative.

This is the one place where guessing generously — assuming the worst — is the safe choice, not the cautious one.

### **! The golden rule, one more time**

When in doubt, throw it out. It's worth repeating on every page of this guide, because it's the rule that never fails you.

## Cleaning up after the sort

A few minutes of cleanup finishes the job and leaves the fridge fresh for what's coming back in.

Wipe down any spills or drips left behind by items you tossed, especially anything from raw meat or seafood packaging.

An open box of baking soda tucked in the back of the fridge helps absorb any lingering odor while things return to normal.

### ✓ A clean start feels better

Once it's wiped down and back to temperature, restocking feels like a fresh start rather than a chore.

## Restock smart

Give the fridge a little time before you fill it back up.

Let the fridge return to 40 degrees or below before restocking with new perishables — check the thermometer rather than guessing.

While you're at it, refill and refreeze any water jugs you used during the outage, so they're ready for next time.

### ✓ Future you will be glad

Refilling the freeze-ahead jugs takes just a few minutes now and saves a scramble at the start of the next outage.

## Print this page and stick it on the fridge

Keep this where you'll actually see it during the next outage.

- ☐ Check the thermometer first.
- ☐ Perishable and above 40 degrees for 2+ hours: toss it.
- ☐ Hard cheese, butter, whole produce, breads: usually keep.
- ☐ Condiments, peanut butter, jam, unopened juice: usually keep.
- ☐ Freezer with ice crystals or at 40 or below: safe to keep.
- ☐ Never taste to test.
- ☐ 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 sorting food after an outage.

### **Q: Is the milk okay if it still smells fine?**

No, not if it's been above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more. Milk that has warmed up can be unsafe even when it smells and looks completely normal. Go by the clock and the thermometer, not your nose.

### **Q: Can I keep hard cheese that sat out during the outage?**

Usually, yes. Hard and processed cheeses hold much less moisture than soft cheeses, so they resist spoiling and generally keep through a warm spell. When something still feels off, throw it out.

### **Q: What about eggs?**

Eggs and egg dishes follow the same rule as other perishables: if they've been above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more, discard them. Don't judge them just by looking at the shell.

### **Q: The freezer stuff looks frozen — is it safe?**

If it still has ice crystals, or reads 40 degrees or below on a thermometer, it's generally safe to refreeze or cook, though the texture may change a little. If it fully thawed and sat warm, follow the 2-hour rule instead.

### **Q: Do these rules cover my insulin?**

No. Medicine doesn't follow the food-safety rules in this guide. Please ask your pharmacist or doctor about your specific medicine — they'll know your situation best.

#### **★ Still have a question?**

Sorting worries after an outage are one of the most common calls I get, 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 sorting what to keep and what to toss after an outage 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

Toss After 2 Hours Warm

Perishables above 40 degrees

| If Warm 2+ Hrs         |         | Why         |
|------------------------|---------|-------------|
| Meat and poultry       | Discard | Spoils fast |
| Milk, soft cheese      | Discard | Spoils fast |
| Eggs, leftovers        | Discard | Spoils fast |
| Cut fruit, cooked rice | Discard | Spoils fast |

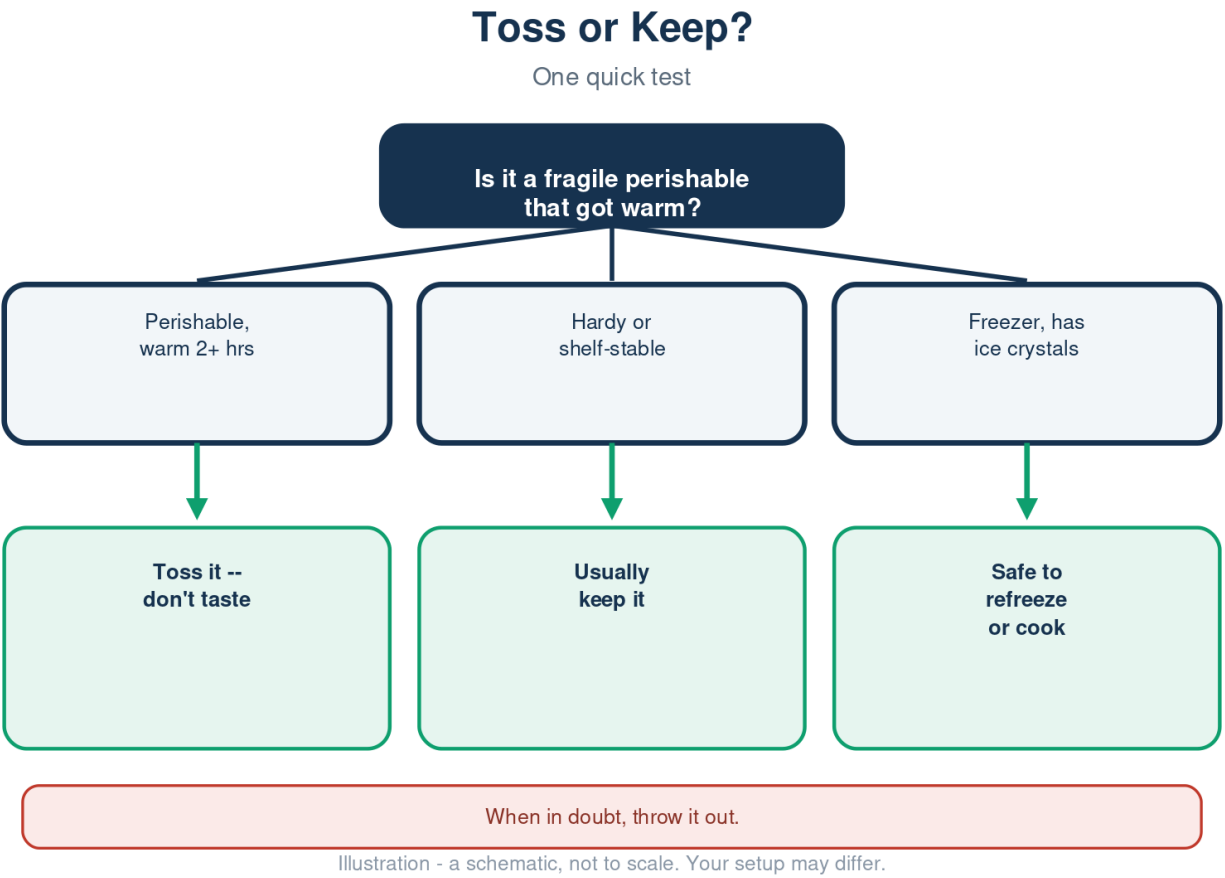
Above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more -- let them go.

## These Usually Keep

Hardier items ride out a warm spell

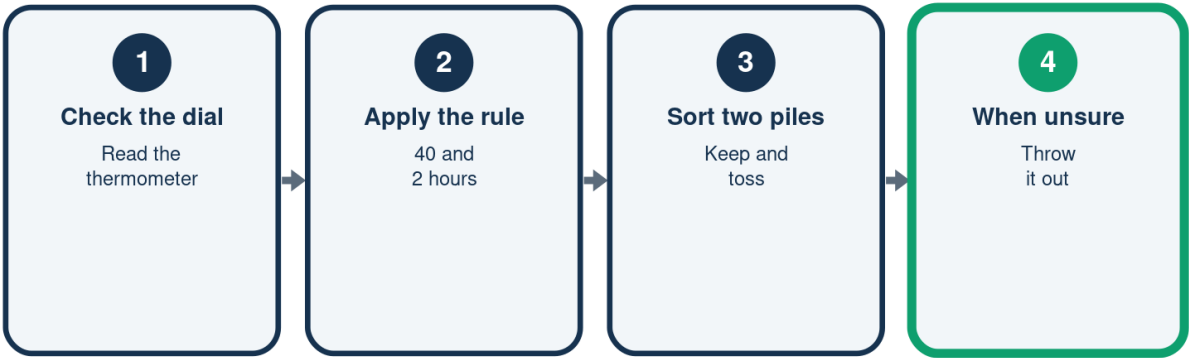
| Usually Safe        |      | Note         |
|---------------------|------|--------------|
| Hard cheeses        | Keep | Low moisture |
| Butter, margarine   | Keep | Briefly fine |
| Whole fruit and veg | Keep | Uncut        |
| Condiments, PB, jam | Keep | Shelf-stable |

When unsure about any item, throw it out.



# Sorting When Power's Back

Calm, in order



A tossed meal is a small loss; food poisoning is not.



## Need a Real Person?

You do not have to remember all of it.  
You just have to remember you can call.  
Friendly, in-home tech help -- I come to you.

### BILL'S PROMISE

If you are not 100% happy with a visit, I will  
make it right -- or refund it. No awkwardness,  
no fine print. That is how I would want to be treated.

**(330) 200-8042 · BillsHomeTech.com**

Bill@BillsHomeTech.com · Mon–Sat 9:00 AM – 7:30 PM

— Bill

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### Prefer help without a visit?

Bill can screen-share and fix many things remotely — a flat \$49, free for Support Plan members.



## 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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