



An Extended Guide · No. 1230

Protecting Your Fridge and Freezer

Keeping food safe
when the power's out

Tech Made Simple — Service Made Personal

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! Read this first — carbon monoxide is the real danger

A running generator's exhaust contains carbon monoxide — an invisible, odorless gas that can kill in minutes. Never run a 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. If an alarm sounds, or anyone feels dizzy, sick, or sleepy, get everyone into fresh air first and ask questions later. Here, that rule matters even more than usual, because the whole point of running a generator for the fridge and freezer is to protect what is inside safely — not to trade one danger for another.

Let's keep the cold where it belongs

When the power goes out, the fridge and freezer are usually the first thing on everyone's mind — and for good reason. This guide walks you through keeping your food safe, and keeping a generator quietly doing that job for you, without the guesswork.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. A huge share of the calls I get during an outage start with the same worry: 'Is the food in my fridge still good?' There's a calm, reliable way to know, and I'll walk you through it here.

The good news is that a fridge and a freezer are two of the easiest things to protect with a generator. They don't need to run every minute of the day, and they hold their cold a lot longer than most people expect — as long as you know the rules.

★ Not sure where to start?

If an outage is already underway and you're worried about what's in your kitchen, call or text me at (330) 200-8042. I can talk you through it in a few minutes, no charge, and no judgment.

The whole guide, on one page

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

- ❑ Keep the doors closed. Every time you open one, you lose cold you can't easily get back.
- ❑ A closed refrigerator keeps food safe for about 4 hours without power.
- ❑ A full freezer holds safe temperatures for about 48 hours closed; a half-full one, about 24.
- ❑ Any perishable food held above 40 degrees for more than 4 hours should be thrown out — when in doubt, throw it out.
- ❑ Never taste food to decide if it's safe. You can't taste-test your way out of food poisoning.
- ❑ An appliance or freezer thermometer tells you the truth better than your eyes or a guess.
- ❑ You don't need to power both the fridge and the freezer every minute — cycling between them works well.

✓ Freeze water jugs ahead of time

If you know weather is coming, fill a few jugs with water and freeze them now. Tucked into a half-empty freezer or fridge, they add hours of extra cold if the power does go out.

The clock most people don't know is running

The moment the power goes out, an invisible clock starts on everything in your fridge and freezer. Knowing the rough times takes the guesswork out of an already stressful day.

These times all assume the doors stay closed. Every time you open one to look, you let warm air in and lose some of that cushion — so peek quickly and decide fast.

Appliance (Doors Closed)	Stays Safe For About
Refrigerator	4 hours
Full freezer	48 hours
Half-full freezer	24 hours

✓ **Write down the time the power went out**

A sticky note on the fridge with the exact time the power quit is worth more than you'd think. It turns a guess into a fact when you're deciding what to keep.

Rule one: keep the doors closed

It sounds almost too simple to be real advice, but it's the single best thing you can do, and it costs nothing.

Every time a door opens, the cold air that took hours to build spills out and warm air rushes in. Multiply that by a curious family checking 'just to see' every hour, and a fridge that should have lasted most of a day is in trouble by lunchtime.

Agree as a family ahead of time: open it only when you truly need something, know what you want before you open the door, and grab it fast. A note taped to the door as a reminder once the power is out is an easy thing to forget in the moment, and a helpful one.

- Decide what you need before you open the door, not while standing in front of it.
- Keep a cooler with ice nearby for things you'll grab often, like drinks or lunch items, so the fridge stays shut.
- If you have young kids or houseguests, a quick reminder note on the door helps everyone remember.
- Group items you'll want together on one shelf so a single quick open covers more ground.

✓ A full fridge holds cold better than an empty one

If yours is looking bare, fill the empty space with jugs of water. It gives the fridge more thermal mass to hold onto — the same idea that makes a full freezer outlast a half-empty one.

How the generator does the work

A refrigerator or freezer looks like a simple appliance, but the motor that keeps it cold — the compressor — asks more of a generator than you might expect.

Most of the time, the fridge or freezer draws a modest, steady amount of power. But every time the compressor kicks on to bring the temperature back down, it needs a brief, much bigger jolt to get that motor spinning — often several times its steady running power, for just a second or two. That jolt is called the starting surge.

This is exactly why a generator that looks 'big enough' on paper can still struggle if it isn't sized with that surge in mind. Our sizing guide walks through the full method, including how to read the number right off your fridge or freezer's own nameplate rather than guessing.

✓ One surge at a time is normal

A generator only has to clear one surge at a time. If the fridge and freezer both happen to kick on together, it's briefer and less dramatic than people expect — but it's still worth sizing with room to spare.

Cords, or part of a bigger hookup?

The fridge and freezer are some of the easiest appliances in the house to power, because they almost always plug into an ordinary outlet.

For most homes, a heavy-duty outdoor-rated extension cord run from the generator straight to the fridge (and another to the freezer, if you have a second one) is all it takes. No wiring, no electrician — just a cord kept up off wet ground and away from foot traffic.

If you're already planning a transfer switch or interlock kit for the furnace or a well pump, the fridge and freezer are usually folded into that same setup — one more circuit on the list your electrician wires in. Either path works well; it mostly comes down to what else you're trying to power.

✓ Match the cord to the distance

A long run from the generator to the kitchen calls for a heavier-gauge cord than a short one. If in doubt, a heavier cord is the safer guess.

You don't have to run both at once

Here's a comfort worth knowing: the fridge and freezer don't need power every single minute to stay safe.

Because both hold their cold for a good while once they're cooled down, many folks run the generator to power the fridge and freezer together for a stretch, then let both sit closed and unpowered for a while, then power them again. This is sometimes called cycling, and it stretches your fuel considerably compared with running everything nonstop.

A simple approach: power both for a couple of hours every several hours, especially overnight when you'd rather not run the generator right outside a bedroom window anyway. As long as the doors stay closed in between, both appliances hold their temperature just fine.

✓ Let the freezer go longer between runs

Since a full freezer holds safe temperatures for roughly two days closed, it can comfortably wait longer between generator runs than the fridge, which only has about four hours of cushion. Prioritize the fridge if you have to choose.

Chest freezers deserve a special mention

If you keep a chest freezer in the basement or garage, you have an advantage — they tend to hold their cold longer than an upright.

Cold air sinks, and a chest freezer's lid opens from the top, so far less cold spills out each time you lift it compared with an upright's door swinging wide. A well-packed chest freezer in a cool space can be one of the most forgiving appliances in the house during an outage.

- Keep it as full as you reasonably can — a packed freezer holds cold longer than a half-empty one.
- Organize it in layers or bins so you can grab what you need in one quick lift, not a long rummage.
- If it lives in an unheated garage or basement, that cooler surrounding air is already working in your favor.
- A dedicated freezer thermometer is especially worth it here, since you can't see the temperature at a glance the way you can with some upright models.

✓ Group your most-used items near the top

Put the things you reach for often — like a bag of vegetables or a package of meat for tonight's dinner — near the top, and the long-term stockpile underneath. Less digging means less time with the lid open.

A little prep before the forecast turns

If you know rough weather is coming, a few minutes in the kitchen the day before can buy you real hours later.

Freezing water in jugs, sealed containers, or even sandwich bags gives your fridge and freezer extra thermal mass — cold blocks that keep working long after the compressor stops. Tuck a few into any open space.

- Fill and freeze a few water jugs a day or two ahead of forecast severe weather.
- Turn your fridge and freezer down a notch colder than usual the day before, if your models allow it, so they start from a deeper cold.
- Use up what's already close to spoiling in the days before, so you're protecting less food if the power does go out.
- Have a cooler and some ice on hand as a backup for anything you'll need to grab often.

✓ This habit pays off even in a short outage

Even a two-hour outage goes more smoothly with a little cold reserve on hand. It costs nothing and takes a few minutes.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

How you protect your food during an outage looks a little different depending on where you live.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or the suburbs, outages tend to be shorter and help usually isn't far away. Your kitchen is probably the main thing on your must-run list, without a lot else competing for the generator's attention.

- A small, quiet generator and a couple of cords are usually plenty for a fridge and freezer.
- Shorter typical outages mean you can often just cycle the generator a few times and be fine.
- Running it for a few hours in the evening, then letting the appliances coast overnight, works well and keeps the neighborhood quiet.
- You likely have just one fridge and maybe one freezer to worry about, which keeps the plan simple.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, outages often run longer, and there's often more food at stake — a big chest freezer of garden produce or meat is common, sometimes alongside a second fridge in the garage.

- More freezer capacity means more to protect, so plan generator time accordingly and prioritize the fullest units.
- Longer outages reward a fuel plan that goes beyond a single tank — see our fuel-storage guide.
- If you're already running a well pump on the same generator, you'll likely be cycling between several priorities, not just the kitchen.
- A backup freezer thermometer in every unit is cheap peace of mind, especially if a freezer lives out in an unheated barn or garage.

★ Somewhere in between?

Plenty of homes have a mix — a modest fridge and a well-stocked garage freezer. Tell me what you're protecting and how long your outages usually run, and I'll help you build a plan that fits. Call (330) 200-8042.

Let the thermometer decide, not your eyes

Food can look and smell perfectly normal and still not be safe. This is the page to take seriously.

The rule from food-safety experts is straightforward: any perishable food — meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy, leftovers — that's been above 40 degrees for more than 4 hours should be thrown out. An appliance or freezer thermometer is the honest way to know, rather than guessing by touch.

Never taste a food to decide whether it's safe. Many of the bacteria that cause food poisoning don't change the taste, smell, or appearance of food at all. If there's any real doubt about how long something sat warm, the safe choice is simple.

! When in doubt, throw it out

This is the one rule worth repeating: if you're not sure how long food was above 40 degrees, or it's been more than 4 hours, don't risk it. A thrown-out meal is a minor loss. A bad case of food poisoning is not.

Grouping and consolidating food

If an outage looks like it will run long, a little reorganizing early on can make a real difference later.

If your freezer is only half full, consider consolidating it with a second freezer's contents so one unit ends up packed and the other can be shut off and left closed, or even unplugged and skipped entirely. A full freezer simply outlasts a half-empty one.

- Move fridge items you won't need soon into a cooler with ice, freeing the fridge to hold cold longer with the door shut.
- Combine two half-full freezers into one full one if you reasonably can, rather than running both.
- Keep the items you'll actually cook with in the next day near the front, so you're not hunting through the whole freezer.
- Label anything you're unsure about with the date the outage started, so a quick glance later tells the story.

✓ Ask a neighbor before you assume the worst

If your freezer is getting crowded from consolidating, a neighbor with freezer space and a generator of their own may be glad to share, especially for a short-term squeeze. It's a small-town habit worth keeping alive.

Bridging the gap while you refuel

A generator has to stop sometime — and refueling it safely takes a few minutes where the fridge and freezer are on their own.

You always want to turn the generator off and let it cool before refueling; spilled fuel on a hot engine can catch fire. That short pause is nothing to worry about food-safety-wise, as long as the doors stay closed the whole time.

If you're planning ahead for a longer outage, having a cooler with ice ready gives you an easy bridge for anything you need to grab during that pause, without opening the fridge itself.

! Never refuel a hot or running generator

This one is about fire safety, not food safety, but it matters just as much. Shut it off, let it cool, refuel outdoors away from any flame or spark, and wipe up any spills before you restart it.

A simple game plan for outage day

Having the order of operations in your head ahead of time turns a stressful day into a manageable one.

- ❑ Note the time the power went out.
- ❑ Keep the fridge and freezer doors closed from this point on.
- ❑ Set up the generator outside, 20 or more feet from the house, exhaust pointed away.
- ❑ Run cords to the fridge and freezer, or use your panel hookup if you have one.
- ❑ Check your thermometers, not just the clock, before deciding what to keep.
- ❑ Cycle the generator on a schedule rather than running it nonstop.
- ❑ When in doubt about any food, throw it out.

★ Want this plan tailored to your kitchen?

On a visit, I can help you figure out the easiest hookup for your specific fridge and freezer, and a cycling schedule that fits your generator. Call (330) 200-8042.

Common mistakes people make

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

- **Opening the door 'just to check'** over and over, which drains the cold faster than anything else.
- **Trusting a guess instead of a thermometer**, especially once the power has been out for many hours.
- **Tasting food to see if it's still good** — please don't. You can't taste bacteria.
- **Running the generator right by the back door** for convenience while ferrying food in and out, instead of well away from the house.
- **Forgetting to note when the power went out**, which turns an easy 4-hour rule into a guessing game.

! Don't let convenience move the generator closer

It's tempting to set the generator near the kitchen door so it's easy to check on while you're managing the fridge. Resist that. Keep it outside, well away from the house — the safety agencies say at least 20 feet — with the exhaust pointed away from every window, door, and vent, the whole time you're running it.

When the power comes back on

The moment the lights flicker back to life isn't quite the moment to relax about the fridge and freezer.

Check your thermometers before you decide anything is safe just because the power is back. If the fridge or freezer never rose above 40 degrees the whole time, or ice crystals are still visible in freezer items, you're almost certainly fine. If you have any doubt about how warm things got or for how long, use the 4-hour rule to guide what stays and what goes.

Give the appliances a little time to fully recover their normal temperature before restocking or making assumptions. It's also a good moment to jot down what you learned — how long your food actually lasted, what worked well — for next time.

✓ Restock your freeze-ahead water jugs

Once things are back to normal, refill and refreeze any water jugs you used up. Future-you, in the next outage, will be glad they're ready.

Extra fridges, garage freezers, and coolers

Many homes have more than one place cold food lives, and each deserves a spot in your plan.

A second fridge in the garage or basement, or a stand-alone freezer, adds real capacity — but also adds to your must-run list and your generator load. Decide ahead of time which units actually matter enough to power in an outage, rather than deciding in the moment.

- A garage fridge holding mostly drinks is a fine one to skip powering, freeing up capacity for the kitchen fridge and freezer.
- A well-stocked deep freezer of meat or garden produce is usually worth prioritizing.
- A quality cooler with ice is a genuinely useful backup for anything you don't want to open the main fridge for.
- If you're weighing whether your generator can cover everything at once, our sizing guide walks through adding it all up.

✓ Not every appliance needs to make the list

Part of a calm outage plan is being honest about what truly matters. A half-empty garage fridge of soda can wait; the freezer full of a summer's worth of garden vegetables usually can't.

Garden harvests, game, and big stockpiles

If you can vegetables, freeze a garden's worth of produce, or keep venison or other game in the freezer, an outage carries a little more weight — and a little more reward for planning ahead.

A freezer full of a season's work is worth protecting seriously. The same rules apply, just with higher stakes: keep it closed, keep it full, know your thermometer reading, and prioritize it in your generator's cycling schedule.

If you process a lot of food seasonally, consider whether your generator and hookup are really sized for a freezer running at full tilt during a multi-day outage, not just for a quiet evening of lights and phone chargers. Rural homes especially should give this some honest thought — see our sizing guide for the full method.

★ Big stockpile, bigger peace of mind

If you've got real money and real work sitting in that freezer, it's worth getting the sizing and the hookup right rather than hoping for the best. I'm glad to look at your setup and help you plan it properly. Call (330) 200-8042.

Sizing it right, even if the kitchen is all you need

Not everyone needs a generator that can run the whole house. If the fridge and freezer are your main concern, that simplifies things nicely.

A smaller, quieter generator is often plenty to run a fridge and a freezer, with room left over for a few lights and phone chargers. Because you're not trying to also start a furnace blower or a well pump, the sizing math is a lot friendlier.

The one thing not to skip is checking the starting surge on your specific fridge and freezer models — their nameplates will tell you what they actually need, rather than you having to guess. Our sizing guide walks through reading a nameplate and adding up a comfortable total, step by step.

✓ When in doubt, size a little bigger

A generator that just barely covers the fridge and freezer's surge leaves no room for a lamp or a phone charger alongside it. A little headroom makes everyday use much less fussy.

Print this page and stick it on the fridge

Keep this where you'll actually see it during an outage — the fridge door isn't a bad choice.

- ☐ Power out? Write down the time.
- ☐ Keep the doors closed. Open only when you must, and be quick.
- ☐ Full freezer is good for about 48 hours closed; half-full, about 24.
- ☐ Fridge is good for about 4 hours closed.
- ☐ Anything perishable above 40 degrees for more than 4 hours: throw it out.
- ☐ Trust a thermometer over a guess, and never taste to test.
- ☐ Generator outside only, 20+ feet from the house, exhaust pointed away.

★ 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 keeping a fridge and freezer going during an outage.

Q: Do I really need to run the generator all day for the fridge?

No. Cycling the generator for a few hours at a time, with the doors kept closed in between, works well for most households and saves a lot of fuel.

Q: How do I know if food is still safe if I'm not sure how long the power was out?

Use a thermometer if you have one, and the 4-hour-above-40 rule as your guide. If there's real doubt, the safe choice is to throw it out.

Q: Can I just move everything to a cooler with ice instead of running a generator?

For a short outage, yes, that can work well for a fridge's worth of food. For a full freezer or a longer outage, a generator is usually far more practical.

Q: Is it safe to refreeze food that partly thawed?

If it still has ice crystals and has stayed at or below 40 degrees, it's generally fine to refreeze. If it's been fully thawed and warm for a while, treat it with the same 4-hour rule as fridge food.

Q: What size generator do I need just for the kitchen?

Often smaller than people expect — a fridge and freezer together are a modest, steady load with one manageable surge. Our sizing guide walks through the specifics.

★ Still have a question?

Food-safety worries during 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 protecting your fridge and freezer 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

How Long Food Stays Safe

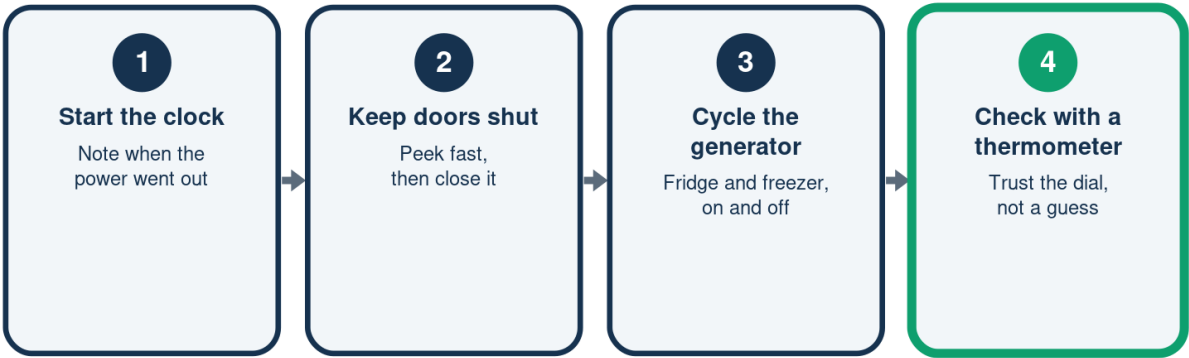
Doors closed the whole time

	Holds Safe Temps For	Best Habit
Refrigerator	About 4 hours	Peek fast, shut it
Full freezer	About 48 hours	Keep it packed
Half-full freezer	About 24 hours	Group food together
Any food above 40F	4+ hrs: discard	When in doubt, toss

General food-safety guidance -- when in doubt, throw it out.

Riding Out an Outage, Step by Step

The calm way to protect what's in the kitchen



Do these in order and most food comes through just fine.

Chest Freezer vs. Upright Freezer

Both work -- one has a small edge

	Holds Cold Longer?	Best Habit
Chest freezer	Yes, cold sinks in	Pack it full
Upright freezer	Loses cold faster	Group items
Either, if full	Best case	Keep it packed
Either, if half-empty	Worst case	Consolidate first

A full freezer of either style outlasts a half-empty one.





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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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