



An Extended Guide · No. 1333

Protecting Your Fridge and Freezer in an Outage

Keep your food — and
your money — safe

Tech Made Simple — Service Made Personal

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! Read this first — panel work is a licensed electrician's job

A transfer switch connects to your home's electrical panel, and panel work is among the most dangerous jobs in any house. The power inside a panel can injure or kill even with the lights off, and a wiring mistake can start a fire or push deadly voltage back onto the lines outside, where a utility crew may be working. Installing, moving, or changing a transfer switch is a licensed electrician's job — almost always with a permit and an inspection. It is never a do-it-yourself project, and it is never something I do myself. This guide is here to help you understand, choose, and safely use a transfer switch — not to wire one. And please, never try to shortcut all this by backfeeding a generator through a wall or dryer outlet with a double-ended cord; that shortcut kills people, and a transfer switch is the safe, legal way to do the very thing it tempts you to do. A fridge or freezer has a plug, so it can run from a safe cord or the switch — but any panel wiring is still a licensed electrician's job.

Keeping your food — and your grocery money — safe

A long outage can spoil a fridge and freezer full of food, which is both a waste and a real expense. Keeping them cold is one of the most satisfying, money-saving things your generator does.

I'm Bill. Good news up front: your fridge and freezer have plugs, so you don't necessarily need them on the transfer switch at all — a safe outdoor-rated cord can power them, which may save switch circuits for hardwired things. Either way works, and this guide covers how to keep your food safe and make smart choices about it.

There's also some genuinely useful food-safety knowledge here — how long food stays good, when to keep it, and when to let it go — that helps whether or not the power's out for long.

★ Want help planning food backup?

I'll help you decide whether to cord-power or switch your fridge and freezer, and set up a smart plan. Call or text (330) 200-8042.

Food safety, on one page

If you remember only these, your food — and your money — are protected.

- ❑ Keep the doors closed: a fridge keeps food safe about 4 hours, a full freezer about 48 hours (about 24 if half full).
- ❑ A fridge and freezer have plugs, so a safe cord can power them — no switch circuit required.
- ❑ Both have motors that surge, so bring them up one at a time.
- ❑ You can cycle the generator between fridge and freezer since they hold cold a while.
- ❑ Discard perishables kept above 40 degrees for over 4 hours — when in doubt, throw it out.
- ❑ An appliance thermometer takes the guesswork out of what's safe.

✓ Closed doors are your best friend

Before you do anything else, keep those doors shut. A closed fridge and freezer buy you hours of protection for free.

How long your food stays safe

These are the food-safety timelines worth knowing by heart — they come from the food-safety agencies.

With the door kept closed, a refrigerator keeps food safely cold for about four hours after the power goes out. A full freezer holds a safe temperature for about forty-eight hours — about twenty-four hours if it's only half full. Those numbers assume you keep the doors shut; every peek lets cold escape and shortens the clock. Knowing these gives you a realistic sense of how urgent your power situation really is.

✓ A fuller freezer lasts longer

A packed freezer holds cold far longer than a near-empty one. In outage-prone seasons, keeping it full — even with jugs of water — helps.

The golden rule: keep the doors closed

It sounds too simple, but it's genuinely the most important thing.

Every time you open the fridge or freezer during an outage, cold air spills out and warm air rushes in, using up your safe-time clock faster. So decide what you need before you open the door, get it quickly, and close it. If you know an outage is coming, get out what you'll want ahead of time. Treat those doors like they're guarding something precious — because they are.

✓ Plan the peek

Before opening, know exactly what you're grabbing. One quick, purposeful open beats three browsing ones.

Fridges and freezers surge

Like other motorized appliances, these need a starting jolt — worth knowing for your generator.

A fridge and a freezer each have a compressor motor that needs a brief surge of power to start, larger than what it uses while running. That means you bring them up one at a time, not together, and count their surge in your sizing. They're modest loads compared to a well pump or furnace blower, but the surge is real — our sizing guide explains how to account for it.

✓ One compressor at a time

Start the fridge, let it settle, then start the freezer. Bringing both compressors up at once is an easy way to bog down a generator.

Cord or transfer switch?

Here's a choice that can save you money on your switch.

Because a fridge and freezer have plugs, you can power them with a safe outdoor-rated extension cord straight from the generator, with no switch circuit needed. Many folks do exactly that, saving their transfer switch's circuits for hardwired things like the furnace and well pump. Alternatively, you can wire the kitchen circuit to the switch for tidiness. Both are fine — it's about what's convenient and cost-effective for your home.

✓ Cords can save switch circuits

Powering the fridge and freezer by cord may let you use a smaller, cheaper transfer switch. Our choosing-circuits guide weighs this trade-off.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

Food backup matters everywhere, but rural homes often have more at stake in the freezer.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town, outages tend to be shorter, so your fridge and a normal freezer are usually easy to protect — often with just a cord and the closed-door rule.

- Shorter outages often fall within the safe-time windows on their own.
- A cord to the fridge and freezer is usually all you need.
- Bring them up one at a time to be gentle on the generator.
- Keep an appliance thermometer to remove the guesswork.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, many families keep a big chest freezer full of garden harvest, meat, or a side of beef — a lot of value to protect through the longer outages rural areas tend to see.

- A full chest freezer holds cold a long time — and represents real money to protect.
- Longer rural outages make cycling power to the freezer worthwhile.
- Keep the freezer full (even with water jugs) so it coasts longer.
- Plan generator fuel for the longer outages the country tends to get.

★ Protecting a full chest freezer?

If you've got a freezer full of garden or game, I'll help you plan to protect that investment through a long outage. Call (330) 200-8042.

Cycling power between fridge and freezer

Because they hold cold, you don't have to power them constantly — a handy trick for stretching a generator.

Since a fridge stays cold for hours and a full freezer for a day or more, you can run them in turns rather than nonstop. Power the fridge for a while to bring it back down, then switch attention to the freezer, then to other needs like the well pump. As long as you don't leave either off long enough to warm past safe temperatures, this cycling lets a modest generator cover a lot — our load-management guide covers the idea broadly.

✓ They coast between turns

A fridge and freezer keep cold while they're off, so cycling power to them — and to your other loads — works beautifully.

Let a thermometer do the deciding

Guessing whether food is still safe is stressful and unreliable. A thermometer settles it.

Keep an inexpensive appliance thermometer in your fridge and another in your freezer. During and after an outage, they tell you the actual temperature, so you know for certain whether food stayed safe. The key number to remember: refrigerated food should stay at or below 40 degrees. If the thermometer shows it climbed above that for too long, you have a clear answer instead of a worried guess.

✓ A dollar of certainty

An appliance thermometer is cheap and takes all the guesswork out of 'is this still good?' Worth having in both the fridge and freezer.

When to keep it, and when to let it go

This is the part that protects your health, so let's be precise.

Discard perishable foods — meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and leftovers — that have been above 40 degrees for more than four hours. When in doubt, throw it out, and never taste food to check if it's safe; harmful bacteria don't always change how food looks or smells. Frozen food that still has ice crystals or is at or below 40 degrees can generally be refrozen or used. Losing some groceries stings, but food poisoning is far worse.

! When in doubt, throw it out

Never taste-test questionable food, and never risk perishables that sat warm too long. Your health is worth far more than a fridge of groceries.

The freezer strategy

Your freezer is your strongest ally in an outage — here's how to use it.

- **Keep it full.** A packed freezer holds cold far longer; fill gaps with jugs of water.
- **Keep it closed.** A full freezer can stay safe about two days unopened.
- **Freeze water ahead of a storm.** Those ice blocks help the freezer coast and can move to the fridge if needed.
- **Group foods together.** Items packed close stay frozen longer than spread out.
- **Check with a thermometer** before deciding on anything after a long outage.

✓ Ice is free insurance

Frozen jugs of water cost nothing, help your freezer last longer, and can chill your fridge or provide drinking water as they melt.

Medication that needs refrigeration

Some medicines must stay cold, and that deserves special care.

If anyone in the household relies on refrigerated medication — insulin is the common one — treat it as a priority, not an afterthought. Keep it in the fridge with the door closed, use a thermometer to watch the temperature, and follow the guidance from your pharmacist or the medication's instructions on how warm is too warm and for how long. If you're unsure, call your pharmacist. Our medical-equipment guide covers building a fuller backup plan for health needs.

! Ask your pharmacist about your medicine

Different medications tolerate different temperatures and times. When in doubt about refrigerated medicine, call your pharmacist rather than guessing.

Getting ready before a storm

A few minutes of prep before an outage protects a lot of food.

- ❑ Turn the fridge and freezer a little colder ahead of a coming storm.
- ❑ Freeze jugs of water to fill freezer gaps and provide backup cold.
- ❑ Make sure appliance thermometers are in place and readable.
- ❑ Get out anything you'll want soon, so you open the doors less during the outage.
- ❑ Know your fridge and freezer safe-time windows so you can plan.

✓ Pre-chill for a head start

Turning things colder before a storm gives your food a bigger cushion once the power goes out.

After the power comes back

When utility power returns, take a calm moment to assess.

Check your appliance thermometers first. If the fridge stayed at or below 40 degrees, the food is fine. For anything that climbed above 40 for more than four hours, follow the discard rule. Frozen food with ice crystals is generally safe to refreeze. Don't rely on how things look or smell — rely on the temperature and the timeline. When in doubt, throw it out, and restock with peace of mind.

✓ Decide by the numbers

Let the thermometer and the four-hour rule make the call, not your nose. It's the safe, reliable way to decide.

Saving money by wasting less

Beyond safety, a little planning saves real grocery money.

A fridge and freezer full of food represents a lot of money, and an outage that spoils it all is a genuine hit to the budget. That's part of what makes keeping them cold so worthwhile — the generator pays you back in food you didn't lose. Cycling power to them, keeping doors closed, and using thermometers to avoid needlessly tossing good food all add up to real savings over the years.

★ The generator earns its keep here

Protecting a full fridge and freezer is one of the clearest ways backup power pays for itself over time. Happy to help you plan it. (330) 200-8042.

Common food-safety mistakes

A few slip-ups cause most spoiled food and worry. Sidestep these.

- **Opening the doors too often** — every peek shortens the safe time.
- **Starting both compressors at once** — bring the fridge and freezer up one at a time.
- **Tasting food to check it** — never; you can't taste harmful bacteria.
- **Guessing instead of measuring** — keep a thermometer and use the four-hour rule.
- **Forgetting refrigerated medicine** — treat it as a priority and ask your pharmacist.

! Never taste to test

The most dangerous mistake is tasting questionable food. Harmful bacteria don't change taste or smell — go by temperature and time.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most about food during outages.

Q: How long will my food stay safe without power?

With doors closed, a fridge stays safe about 4 hours, a full freezer about 48 hours (about 24 if half full). Every door-opening shortens that.

Q: Do I need the fridge on the transfer switch?

Not necessarily — it has a plug, so a safe outdoor-rated cord can power it. Many folks do that to save switch circuits for hardwired items.

Q: Can I refreeze food that thawed?

Frozen food that still has ice crystals or stayed at or below 40 degrees can generally be refrozen. When in doubt, throw it out — and never taste to check.

Q: How do I know if food is still safe?

Use an appliance thermometer. Discard perishables kept above 40 degrees for more than 4 hours. Go by the numbers, not by look or smell.

★ More food-safety questions?

Call or text (330) 200-8042 — I'm glad to help you plan so nothing goes to waste.

How I help protect your food

It's a small thing that saves real money and worry, and I'm glad to help you set it up.

I'll help you decide whether to cord-power or wire your fridge and freezer, set up appliance thermometers, plan a simple cycling routine for long outages, and put together a before-the-storm checklist. If refrigerated medication is part of the picture, we'll make sure that's handled carefully too. The goal is that a long outage never means a kitchen full of spoiled groceries.

★ Let's keep your food safe

Call or text (330) 200-8042 and we'll make a simple plan to protect your fridge and freezer through the next outage.

One safety reminder

Keeping food cold means running the generator — so the usual rule applies.

! 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. Whether you power the fridge by cord or through the switch, the generator still runs outdoors only, far from the house, exhaust pointed away.

A word on chest freezers and second fridges

Many homes — especially rural ones — have more than one cold appliance to think about.

If you have a chest freezer in the garage, a second fridge, or both, remember each is another load and another plug. You may not be able to power everything at once on a modest generator, so prioritize: a full chest freezer holds cold the longest, so it can often wait while you tend the kitchen fridge first, then get its turn. Plan which cold appliances matter most, and cycle power among them as needed.

✓ Prioritize your cold appliances

With more than one freezer or fridge, decide the order of importance ahead of time. The fullest freezer can usually coast the longest.

The short version to carry with you

If the details blur, hold onto these.

- ❑ Keep doors closed: fridge ~4 hours, full freezer ~48 (about 24 if half full).
- ❑ Fridge and freezer have plugs — a safe cord can power them, saving switch circuits.
- ❑ Cycle power to them since they hold cold; bring compressors up one at a time.
- ❑ Use a thermometer; discard perishables above 40 degrees over 4 hours; when in doubt, throw it out.

✓ Keep this guide handy

Those food-safety timelines are worth having on hand — keep this guide with your home papers.

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 keeping your fridge and freezer safe in 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

How Long Food Stays Safe

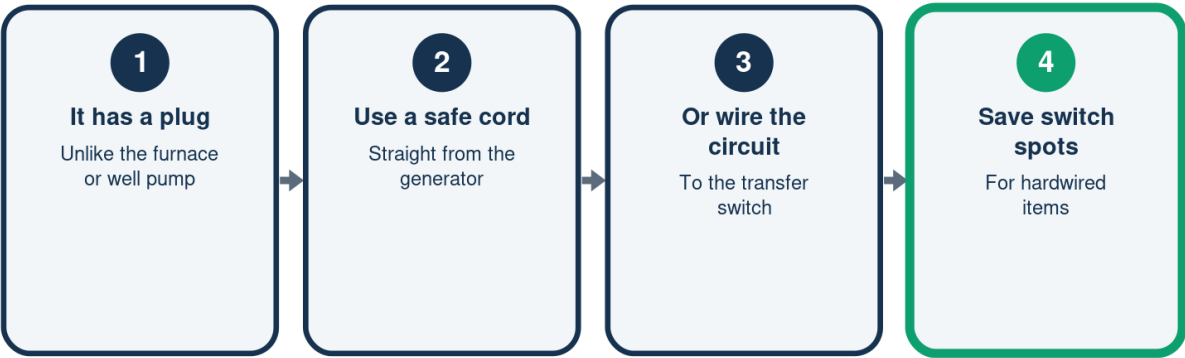
With the doors kept closed

Appliance		Safe time (doors closed)
Refrigerator	About 4 hours	
Full freezer	About 48 hours	
Half-full freezer	About 24 hours	
Every door-open	Shortens the clock	

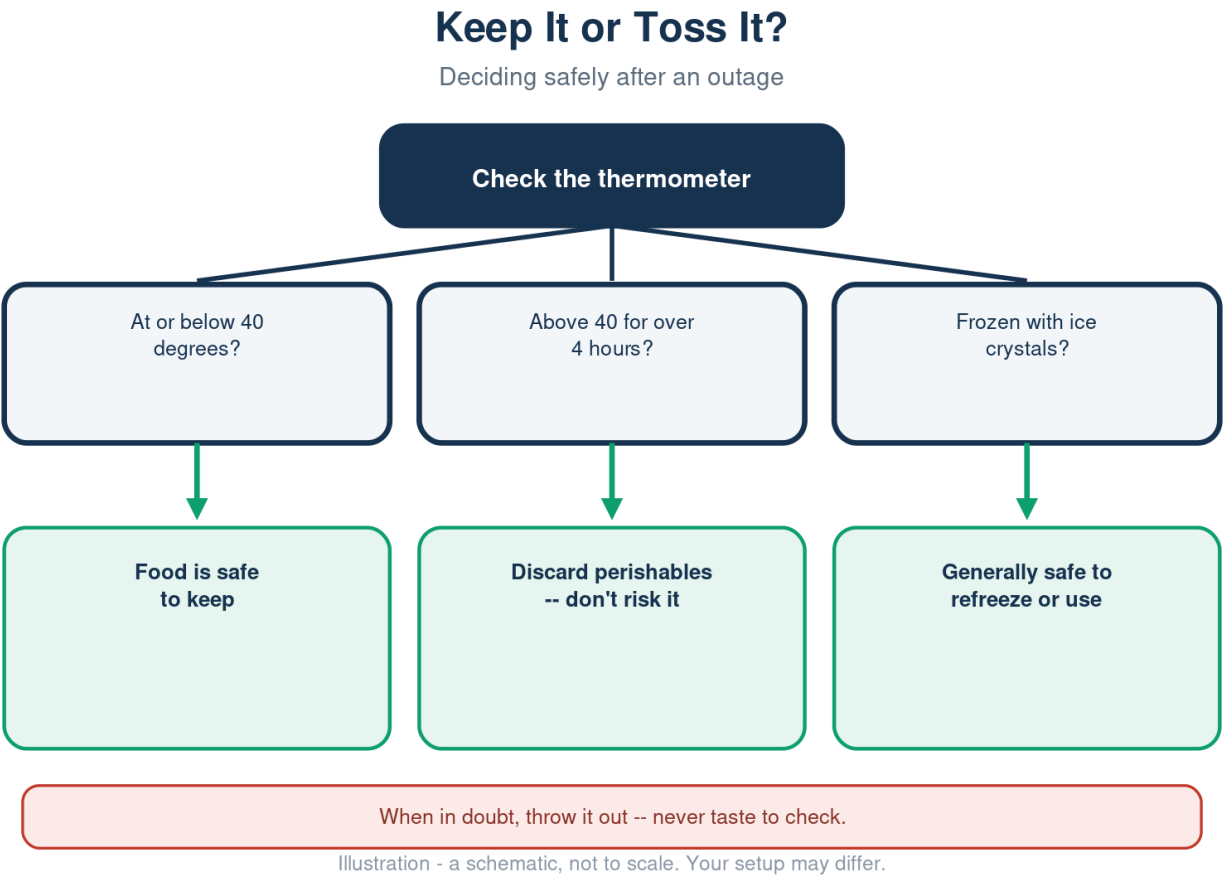
Keep doors closed -- every peek lets cold escape.

Cord or Switch for the Fridge?

It has a plug, so you have a choice



Cord-powering can let you use a smaller, cheaper switch.



Make Your Freezer Last

Simple tricks that buy hours



A full, closed freezer is your strongest ally in an outage.



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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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