

Post-Irene outages can present health hazards

September 1 2011, By Chris DeFrancesco



A carbon monoxide detector with a battery backup can sense unsafe levels of CO in the home even during a power outage. Credit: Stock photo

Prolonged power outages aren't just inconvenient. They can be hazardous.

Following Tropical Storm Irene, the outage count peaked at more than 750,000 in Connecticut, many of them extending for several days.

That's more than enough time for your food to spoil, unless you can keep your refrigerator running with a portable generator. But poison control

experts will tell you, generators can present other problems.

“People need to be more aware, portable generators produce [carbon monoxide](#), or CO,” says Amy Hanoian Fontana, community education specialist at the Connecticut Poison Control Center. “CO exposure can cause loss of consciousness and death.”

The Connecticut Poison Control Center has been receiving calls about CO poisoning since the storm. Those using portable generators should remember:

- Generators should only be used outdoors, more than 20 feet from the building and any doors or windows.
- Never use a generator indoors, including a basement or garage, even if doors and windows are open.
- The most common symptoms of CO poisoning are headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion.
- People who are sleeping or who have been drinking alcohol can die from CO poisoning before ever having symptoms.
- If you think you may have CO poisoning, consult a health care professional right away.
- It is vital to have a CO detector with a battery backup so that it can function even during a [power outage](#).

“CO cannot be seen, smelled, or heard,” Hanoian-Fontana says.

“Working CO detectors are the only way to tell if carbon monoxide is in the home. They save lives. All homes should have them, generator or not.”

Food Safety

If you don't have a generator, it won't take long for you to be faced with some decisions about the food in the fridge.

“We do get calls about whether food is safe to eat,” Hanoian-Fontana says. “Foodborne illness and food poisoning are nasty, but avoidable, problems. A good rule of thumb is, ‘when in doubt, throw it out.’”

The following guidelines are from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention:

- For the freezer section: A freezer that is half full will hold food safely for up to 24 hours. A full freezer will hold food safely for 48 hours. Do not open the freezer door if you can avoid it.
- For the refrigerated section: Pack milk, other dairy products, meat, fish, eggs, gravy, and spoilable leftovers into a cooler surrounded by ice. Inexpensive Styrofoam coolers are fine for this purpose.
- Use a digital quick-response thermometer to check the temperature of your food right before you cook or eat it. Throw away any food that has a temperature of more than 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

Anyone who has questions about carbon monoxide exposure, food safety, or other power outage hazards like medication errors, bug bites, contact with battery corrosion, gasoline siphoning, or whether water is safe to drink, should call the Poison Control Center Hotline: 800-222-1222 anytime day or night.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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