

# Cornell Cooperative Extension

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**Tompkins County**

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## Emergency Preparedness

The thought of a power outage can be very concerning. Many individuals and families have never experienced being without power and services for more than a couple of hours, if at all. Power outages can occur anywhere, anytime due to storms and accidents. In our climate it is wise to be prepared for outages that could occur due to winter storms. During severe winter storms it is possible for the power to be out for several days and the roads closed making it impossible to get to the store. Planning ahead for such a situation helps us to be better able to cope with it if it really happens.

Here are a few ideas and suggestions of ways individuals and families can prepare for an emergency situation of this nature. It is intended to raise ones' awareness and to offer some suggestions as to how to think through what could happen. Every situation and household is unique and will have its own set of problems and solutions. Here is a start to working it through.

### **Have A Power Outage Drill**

It can prove very helpful to run a power outage drill so you can actually experience **what will work, what does not, and what becomes more difficult to do.**

- Select a time when the whole family can participate.
- Discuss ahead of time what you expect will happen.
- Schedule an hour or so when you will actually turn the power off. The first time try this in the daylight. It is wise to run a second drill after dark to note the differences.
- Together walk through the house and check out what is still working, what does not, and where difficulties occur. Make a list of these concerns.
- Turn the power back on. Reset all your electric clocks.
- Now start working on the list of identified concerns. What options do you have? How can you resolve these issues?
- Consider having a full day without power. Select a day when everyone will be home. Pretend the power is off and go through the whole day without using it. (You'll want to leave the refrigerator and freezer connected so as not to compromise your food.) Be aware of how you would store your food. Cover clock faces or disconnect them. Doing a run through of this type lets everyone experience first hand how their daily routines would be impacted and what adjustments need to be made.

*Helping You Put Knowledge to Work*

## **Be Sure to Check:**

- The obvious nonfunctioning items will include:
  - **Lights**
    - ◆ Inside and Outside
  - **Electrical Appliances**
    - ◆ Refrigerators will need attention if the power is off more than a few hours.
    - ◆ Freezers which are full and left closed will keep the food safe for 3 days. Products such as ice cream should be removed as it will melt first and can make a mess. If the freezer is not full or the outage lasts more than 3 days, dry ice can be used to extend the storage time.
    - ◆ Ranges, microwaves, electric hot water heaters, furnaces, fans, space heaters, televisions, electric clocks, tape players, electric can openers, hair dryers, electric shavers, etc. will NOT function.
- **Gas Furnaces and Appliances** - Many gas appliances depend on electrically powered controls or fans. Check yours.
  - **Gas and Oil Fueled Furnaces** almost always depend on an electrical thermostat and fan. Without electrical power they will **not** run.
  - **Gas Ranges**
    - ◆ Newer gas ranges use an electronic ignition system for igniting the range top burners. This system can be bypassed by turning on the unit's control and using a match to ignite the gas.
    - ◆ The newer models use an electric glow coil to ignite the oven. In this case the oven will not work without power.
    - ◆ If the gas range has a pilot light, it should work fine. Try it to be sure.
    - ◆ Obviously the clocks and timers on the range/oven unit will not work. The only way that would interfere with the use of the range/oven would be for time started cooking.
  - **Gas Hot Water Heaters**
    - ◆ Check your water heater. It should work just fine.
- **Water Source**
  - If you are on a municipal water source, your water should work.
  - If you have a well and your own water pump, the pump is most likely dependent on electricity so you will not have running water. In this case you might like to stock a few containers of water for emergencies. Consider what alternate water sources are available to you. Obtain information on how to treat alternate water sources.

- If you also have a gas water heater, turn it off. There is no need to continue to heat the water that you cannot use. This also eliminates any danger of heating the tank just in case the water should be drained from it.
- **Check the Telephone**
  - Cordless phones and phones connected to an answering machine will not function without electricity.
  - A standard, directly connected phone should work.

### **What Happens Without Lights?**

- Check the placement of furniture, rugs, and other obstacles. In the dark, even with the help of a flash light, it is really helpful to have pathways as open as possible.
- Do you have an interior bathroom or closet without windows? Even in the day time these areas can be very dark.
- Consider using the glow-in-the-dark stars or other novelty items to help illuminate the way. These items, strategically located, can help one find the way even in the dark.
- While it is romantic to eat by candle light, cooking by candle light or flash lights can be very challenging. Consider cooking the evening meal late afternoon before the sun sets.

### **Important Considerations:**

- If you are creating an emergency food supply, remember without power refrigeration will be a problem. Therefore look for foods that can be stored on the shelf. A wide assortment of canned items are available. Consider also dried milk and other shelf stable products. Consider containers that contain just what will be needed for a meal. Leftovers may not be able to be stored safely.
- Try to avoid foods that are totally unlike what you normally eat. Major dietary changes can cause digestive upsets.
- If you will have a cooking source and water, your biggest concern may be keeping cold foods cold.
- If you have a cooking source but **no** running water, preparing meals and doing clean up is much more challenging. If you will not have running water, consider having on hand canned soups, juices, baby formula, and other foods that will **not** need to have water added. Plan to use the liquid in canned vegetables for cooking rice or pasta or adding to condensed soups.

### **Other Things to Consider:**

- During a period of a power outage or period when the power is on and off, it is wise to turn the electrical breakers off to the house or unplug your appliances to protect them. Once power is restored turn them on one at a time so as not to overload the system and to check for any problems.
- Without power our activity and recreational options change considerably. The television, video games, radio, stereo, computers, etc. will not function. Options many people turn to include reading, story telling, cards and board games.
- Stock up on batteries for flashlights. Also consider a battery operated radio for checking in on the news and for entertainment.
- Avoid using candles for light. Battery operated alternate light sources are much safer.
- If you live in an area with street lights or other outside lights, remember it will be very dark out at night. You may need to alter your schedule to do outdoor activities before dark.
- Do you have a pet? How will its needs be met? A hand pump or food baster can be used to provide an adequate supply of air for an aquarium of fish.
- You may want to wash clothes less frequently since the washer and dryer will not work. Some items can be done by hand and hung out to dry. Drying time will be greatly increased. (Gas dryers are also dependent on electricity to operate.)
- If you have a gas water heater, you will have hot water for cooking, dishes, and showers!

### **Sources of Reliable Information:**

When looking for specific information on emergency preparedness issues always be sure to use reliable sources. There is much information available. Some of it, however, contains outdated techniques and procedures. Be particularly careful with information related to food safety, food storage, food preservation, and water. Using unreliable information could put your family at risk. Check with your local Cornell Cooperative Extension for the current USDA recommendations or access information on the Cooperative Extension, USDA, FDA, or FSIS web sites.

If an outage does occur, by being prepared, you can help family members see it as an experience rather than a horrible thing. Plan ahead as to what you would do for heat, cooking, water, food, and activities. Document your experiences by keeping individual or a family journal each day recording the notable events that happened that day. Consider having a camera and film available to document the experience.

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