



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO  
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

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PROCEDURES FOR FOOD FACILITIES  
IN THE EVENT OF A MAJOR DISASTER  
OR EMERGENCY



During a major disaster water, sewer, and natural gas lines can rupture and break. Also, electrical and power supply lines are often broken and services interrupted. Given these potential problems, the following guidelines should be followed:

1. **WATER SERVICES PROBLEMS:** If water service is interrupted or contaminated, water from these lines cannot be used for drinking or cooking. Water lines to buildings that supply drinking fountains, coffee machines, soft drink/soda machines, and ice machines with water, cannot be used for human consumption. If they do, there is a great risk of illness or death due to the contamination of the water source.

**SOLUTION:** If there is no potable (uncontaminated water) or no water available in the food establishment, the business needs to immediately close and must contact our Department for approval prior to re-opening.

2. **ELECTRICAL PROBLEMS:** If the electrical supply is interrupted or completely out, food stored in refrigerators or freezers may spoil, depending on the duration of the power outage. If the power is out, DO NOT OPEN these units if possible. An unopened refrigerator should be able to maintain a temperature of 41°F or below for up to 4 hours. A refrigerator whose door has been opened may maintain this temperature for less than 2 hours. Readily perishable foods can generally be kept at room temperature for up to an hour without spoilage or potential health problems. (We are not approving readily perishable foods to be stored at room temperature. Under the California Health and Safety code, they must be maintained at 41°F or below, or 135°F or above at all times. This applies only to disaster situations.) Frozen foods once thawed cannot be refrozen.

**SOLUTION:** Try to keep readily perishable foods at 41°F or below. Use clean uncontaminated ice to help keep these foods at the proper temperature. Do not use for human consumption if they have been above 41°F for over an hour. However, they can possibly be used as food for animals, such as household pets. Any spoiled foods should be put into sealed plastic garbage bags and disposed of in the dumpster. Make sure the dumpster lids are closed to prevent fly breeding and access by rodents.

3. **SEWAGE PROBLEMS:** If the sewer line has been ruptured or broken, any water or sewage from the food establishment may either start backing up inside the facility or start overflowing out the facility, or both.

**SOLUTION:** Immediately discontinue the use of all toilet facilities, and any discharges of wastewater. The food facility must immediately close and must contact our Department for approval prior to re-opening. Try to contain sewage discharges outside the building to prevent risk to the public, and use any chlorine or bleach to help disinfect the area. Any food, including cans or bottles, contaminated by the sewage must be properly disposed of in the dumpsters and CANNOT be washed and reused. All floors and contaminated equipment must be properly cleaned and disinfected.

4. **GAS LINE PROBLEMS:** If gas lines ruptured and service is interrupted, some equipment in the food facility will not be functional including stoves, steam tables, and the hot water heater.

**SOLUTION:** Food facilities would have a problem operating without natural gas service. Any multi-use utensils, such as plates and silverware could not be properly washed or sanitized. Single service utensils would have to be used, such as paper or plastic plates, cups, knives, forks, and spoons. Employees would also not be able to properly wash their hands. Unless the facility is a totally pre-packaged food establishment, our Department recommends that the facility close until service is restored.

5. **FIRES:** Fires are sometimes caused during an earthquake or other disaster.

**SOLUTION:** If your food facility is involved in a fire, it must be closed immediately and inspected by our Department prior to reopening.

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