Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

6 MEASURES TO KEEP FOOD SAFE in a DROUGHT

1. PRACTISE GOOD HYGIENE

Why is it important? Maintaining good hygiene practices during droughts can be challenging due to water shortages. However, upholding basic cleanliness remains essential to prevent the spread of harmful bacteria, viruses, parasites and other contaminants that cause foodborne diseases.

Wash hands with soap and water (or sanitizer) before and after handling food, before eating, and after using the toilet.

Separate raw and cooked food, and never use the same equipment for both unless it has been sanitized.

Clean food storage areas and any surfaces, utensils and equipment used to prepare food.

Do not use or consume food with an unusual color or odor, or past the expiration date.

Use a garbage bin with a lid to control odors and avoid attracting pests.

DID YOU KNOW? Cleaning areas used to prepare or store food is done in three main steps: removing debris (e.g. wiping, vacuuming), rinsing, and sanitizing to kill germs. Certain sanitizers might not be safe for food contact surfaces, so check the label to make sure it is food grade.

2. AVOID CONTAMINATION

Why is it important? Droughts involve long periods without rainfall, during which dust storms and wildfires are more common. These often carry spores, microbes and chemical pollutants that can contaminate crops, food and water. Livestock deaths also occur more frequently during droughts.

Before a dust storm or wildfire, protect your food by keeping it covered – preferably airtight.

Check food for damage, spoilage or contamination.

Even during a drought, never use cans or cartons that are swollen or leaking and cracked or broken glass containers.

Farmers facing livestock deaths should dispose of carcasses safely following government guidelines.

DID YOU KNOW? Dead animals can contaminate soil, groundwater, and other water sources. Carcasses can also spread disease through scavengers, insects and vermin. They need to be handled and disposed of safely by professionals in designated areas where they won't cause harm.

3. CONTROL TEMPERATURE

Why is it important? High temperatures and heatwaves often occur alongside droughts. This can speed up the growth of germs in food, making it spoil faster. Harmful bacteria grow rapidly in the Danger Zone (5 °C to 60 °C), especially in perishable foods like meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, or leftovers. Power outages may also prevent fridges and freezers from operating safely.

During a power outage, avoid opening the freezer or fridge and do not add any food.

Don't eat any perishable foods left above 4 °C for more than four hours.

Cook food thoroughly until steaming hot, especially meat, poultry, seafood, eggs or leftovers.

Be safe, not sorry, and discard any foods you're unsure about.

DID YOU KNOW? Fridges and freezers continue to keep food cold temporarily during power outages. Food stays frozen for 48 hours in a full freezer and 24 hours in a half-full freezer. Fridges will maintain safe temperatures for up to four hours. Opening the doors or adding warm food will make the internal temperature rise, which is why it's important to keep doors shut.

4. USE SAFE WATER

Why is it important? Droughts reduce the amount of water available. This can lower water quality by making pollutants more concentrated. When clean water is scarce, it can be difficult to keep food safe. However, it is possible to conserve water without compromising on cleanliness, even during a drought.

Drink and prepare food only with bottled, boiled or treated water if safe water is unavailable from your usual source.

Conserve water by not letting taps run continuously. Wash dishes in a basin.

Repair indoor and outdoor water appliances promptly to prevent leaks.

Defrost food in a microwave or refrigerator to avoid using tap water.

Be alert to changes in water quality, and follow advice provided by government authorities.

DID YOU KNOW? Water that comes in direct contact with food or food contact surfaces (e.g. counters, dishes, or kitchen utensils) should be "potable," meaning safe for human consumption. Otherwise, germs might spread from the water to the food.

5. USE SAFE INGREDIENTS

Why is it important? Droughts, linked to high temperatures and water shortages, are a serious hazard to livestock, poultry and crops. Harmful bacteria, which appear as blue-green algal blooms, can grow in rivers and streams, as drought often reduce the flow of the water. These can be absorbed by fish or shellfish, making them unsafe to consume.

Always buy meat and produce from a trusted supplier with a good track record, especially during a drought.

Follow advisories on algal blooms before consuming fish or shellfish from stagnant water.

Never eat dead animals that you find, as they can harbor diseases or toxins.

Check date marks and use foods with a short shelf-life first. Don't consume food past its expiration date.

DID YOU KNOW? The "Best before date" refers to food quality, so unopened food past this date may still be edible if it has been stored properly. However, food past the "Use-by date" (also known as the "Expiration date") should not be sold or consumed due to safety reasons.

6. STORE AND TRANSPORT SAFELY

Why is it important? Droughts increase the likelihood of dust storms, which can carry harmful pollutants. Protecting food from these particles during storage and transport preserves its quality and safety. Droughts also disrupt natural food sources, forcing wildlife and pests to search for food in human-occupied areas and increasing the risk of food contamination and disease transmission.

Store and transport food in clean containers. Protect food by keeping it covered.

Clean and sanitize all food storage and transportation spaces to remove food sources for pests.

Protect food storage areas and transport vehicles from pests by sealing entry points and setting up traps and baits.

Always follow the manufacturer's storage instructions and shelf-life labels.

Throw out food that has gone bad promptly to avoid spoiling other foods.

DID YOU KNOW? Implementing the FIFO system – "first in, first out" – is an important measure for maintaining the safety and quality of food. For fresh produce or perishables, this means using or removing first whichever item was stored earliest. For long shelf-life products, use items according to the best-before date mark for optimal quality.