

POWER OUTAGE / BLACKOUT

WHAT IT IS

Power outages can be frustrating and troublesome when they last a short while, but they can be dangerous if they last days or longer – especially in very cold or hot weather, or for individuals with specialized medical needs. Outages can also be costly, as all the refrigerated or frozen food in a home is liable to spoil.

Outages may occur on their own, but more often they are a secondary effect of tornadoes, hurricanes, thunderstorms, winter storms, extreme heat (from system overload), or even deliberate acts such as an explosive or cyber attack. Some recent large-scale power outages were the result of grid-management software glitches, with no physical damage to components.

Depending on the primary hazard, damage unrelated to the outage may slow power restoration primarily due to downed trees or floodwaters blocking access.

WHAT TO DO

Before (Preparedness/ Mitigation)

- ❑ Sign up for Fairfax Alerts and have a battery or crank powered radio available.
- ❑ Back up all critical files on your computer.
- ❑ Consider purchasing a generator for your home – consult an electrician or engineer before purchasing and installing. Safely store an adequate supply of fuel for the generator.
- ❑ Unplug electrical equipment. Spikes and surges could occur as power is restored, damaging equipment.
- ❑ Fill a bucket or two as a water source and potentially for bathing and flushing the toilet – if municipal water pressure relies on electricity, pressure in the system may fail.
- ❑ Maintain a phone with an earpiece that connects by a cord to the receiver (not a wireless phone), and by wire to the wall; retain copper-wire phone service if you have the option (conventional phone service is not reliant on electrical power). If you switch to VoIP, be sure to purchase a battery backup.
- ❑ Charge cellphones and battery-powered devices you use regularly.
- ❑ Remember that your gas appliances will still work, even in a blackout – this include gas ranges and grills. Do not attempt to use a gas furnace or hot water heater unless you are a licensed professional.
- ❑ Keep tabs on food storage/ food safety:
 - Do not open your refrigerator or freezer – they will remain cold longer this way.
 - If it is cold outside, consider putting your food outside to keep it cool.
 - How long your appliances stay cold will depend on their size, how full they are (a fuller cooler will stay cold longer), and how warm the air around them is; a refrigerator will warm up within a few hours; a freezer is typically OK for a full day or longer.
 - Once you decide to open the refrigerator or freezer, plan to eat everything you can as fast as you can – a thawing freezer and a backyard grill can be the foundation of an excellent neighborhood “freezer party.”
- ❑ If water pressure fails, a bucket of water dumped manually into a toilet will cause it to flush.

During (Response)

- ❑ Report your outage. Never assume a neighbor has reported it.
- ❑ Use a flashlight only for emergency lighting.
- ❑ Never leave a burning candle unattended. Consider using battery-operated flameless candles.
- ❑ Unplug electrical equipment until a steady power supply returns.
- ❑ Only use generators away from your home and never run a generator inside a home or garage, or connect it to your home’s electrical system.

After (Recovery)

- ❑ If power is restored, be certain it is steady before you plug equipment into it.
- ❑ Eliminate unnecessary travel especially by car as some traffic lights might be out and roads could be congested.
- ❑ Throw away any refrigerated food that has been exposed to temperatures 40° F or above for two hours or more, or that has an unusual odor, color, or texture. When in doubt, throw it out!

KEY TERMS

- ▶ A **Power Outage** is a state of electric power loss in a given area or section of a power grid. It could affect a single meter (house or building), a block, a circuit, or a system, depending on the extent of the damage and the root cause of the outage.
- ▶ A **Brownout** is indicated by voltage dropping in the system. It is characterized by the lights dimming.
- ▶ A **Blackout** is the total loss of power in a given area.