

Best Foods to Stockpile for an Emergency

Natural disasters—a flood, hurricane, blizzard—often come with little or no warning. Stocking up now on the right nonperishable food items will help you weather the storm with less stress.

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Photo by Aya Brackett

Fueling your body during an emergency is very different from your everyday diet. Because you'll probably expend more energy than you normally would, you should eat high-energy, high-protein foods. And because you'll have a limited supply, the higher-quality foods you eat—and the less of them—the better. "In a disaster or an emergency you want those calories," says Barry Swanson, a food scientist at Washington State University. "You want some nutrients and some fiber—something to keep your diet normal."

"In an emergency, generally you tend to think of meeting more basic needs than preferences and flavors," says Elizabeth Andress, professor and food safety specialist at the University of Georgia. "But if you plan right, you can have a great variety of foods and nutrients." Here, Andress and Swanson weigh in on what items you should include.

What to Always Keep in Your Pantry

These items have lengthy expiration dates, so you can stash them away for long periods of time. Make a list of everything in your stockpile and check expiration dates every 6 to 12 months to keep things fresh. And don't forget to have a can opener on hand at all times—all that food won't be of any use if you can't open it.

- **Peanut butter**

A great source of energy, peanut butter is chock-full of healthful fats and protein. Unless the jar indicates otherwise, you don't have to refrigerate after opening.

- **Whole-wheat crackers**

Crackers are a good replacement for bread and make a fine substitute when making sandwiches. Due to their higher fat content, whole-wheat or whole-grain crackers have a shorter shelf life than their plain counterparts (check the box for expiration dates), but the extra fiber pays off when you're particularly hungry. Consider vacuum-packing your crackers to prolong their freshness.

- **Nuts and trail mixes**

Stock up on these high-energy foods—they're healthful and convenient for snacking. Look for vacuum-packed containers, which prevent the nuts from oxidizing and losing their freshness.

- **Cereal**

Choose multigrain cereals that are individually packaged so they don't become stale after opening.

- **Granola bars and power bars**

Healthy and filling, these portable snacks usually stay fresh for at least six months. Plus, they're an excellent source of carbohydrates. "You can get more energy from carbohydrates without [eating] tons of food," says Andress.

- **Dried fruits, such as apricots and raisins**

In the absence of fresh fruit, these healthy snacks offer potassium and dietary fiber. "Dried fruits provide you with a significant amount of nutrients and calories," says Swanson.

- **Canned tuna, salmon, chicken, or turkey**

Generally lasting at least two years in the pantry, canned meats provide essential protein. Vacuum-packed pouches have a shorter shelf life but will last at least six months, says Diane Van, manager of the USDA meat and poultry hotline.

- **Canned vegetables, such as green beans, carrots, and peas**

When the real deal isn't an option, canned varieties can provide you with essential nutrients.

- **Canned soups and chili**

Soups and chili can be eaten straight out of the can and provide a variety of nutrients. Look for low-sodium options.

- **Bottled water**

Try to stock at least a three-day supply--you need at least one gallon per person per day. “A normally active person should drink at least a half-gallon of water each day,” says Andress. “The other half gallon is for adding to food and washing.”

- **Sports drinks, such as Gatorade or Powerade**

The electrolytes and carbohydrates in these drinks will help you rehydrate and replenish fluid when water is scarce.

- **Powdered milk**

Almost all dairy products require refrigeration, so stock this substitute for an excellent source of calcium and vitamin D when fresh milk isn't an option.

- **Sugar, salt, and pepper**

If you have access to a propane or charcoal stove, you may be doing some cooking. A basic supply of seasonings and sweeteners will improve the flavor of your food, both fresh and packaged.

- **Multivitamins**

Supplements will help replace the nutrients you would have consumed on a normal diet.

Next: What to Buy Right Before an Emergency

What to Buy Right Before an Emergency

If you've been given ample warning that a storm is coming, there's still time to run to the market and pick up fresh produce and other items that have shorter shelf lives. Most of these foods will last at least a week after they've been purchased and will give you a fresh alternative to all that packaged food. Make sure to swing by your local farmers' market if it's open; because the produce there is fresher than what you'll find at your typical supermarket, you'll add a few days to the life span of your fruits and vegetables.

- **Apples**

Apples last up to three months when stored in a cool, dry area away from more perishable fruits (like bananas), which could cause them to ripen more quickly.

- **Citrus fruits, such as oranges and grapefruits**

Because of their high acid content and sturdy skins, citrus fruits can last for up to two weeks without refrigeration, particularly if you buy them when they're not fully ripe. Oranges and grapefruits contain lots of vitamin C and will keep you hydrated.

- **Avocados**

If you buy an unripe, firm avocado, it will last outside the refrigerator for at least a week.

- **Tomatoes**

If you buy them unripe, tomatoes will last several days at room temperature.

- **Potatoes, sweet potatoes, and yams**

If you have access to a working stove, these root vegetables are good keepers and make tasty side dishes. Stored in a cool, dark area, potatoes will last about a month.

- **Cucumbers and summer squash**

These vegetables will last a few days outside of refrigeration and can be eaten raw.

- **Winter squash**

While most are inedible uncooked, winter squashes, such as acorn squash, will keep for a few months. If you'll be able to cook during the emergency, stockpile a bunch.

- **Hard, packaged sausages, such as sopressata and pepperoni**

You can't eat canned tuna and chicken forever. Try stocking up on a few packages of dry-cured salamis like sopressata, a southern Italian specialty available at most grocery stores. Unopened, they will keep for up to six weeks in the pantry, says Van.

More Food Advice for an Emergency

- If the electricity goes out, how do you know what is and isn't safe to eat from the refrigerator? If your food has spent more than four hours over 40° Fahrenheit, don't eat it. As long as frozen foods have ice crystals or are cool to the touch, they're still safe. "Once it gets to be room temperature, bacteria forms pretty quickly, and you want to be very careful about what you're eating," says Swanson. Keep the doors closed on your refrigerator and freezer to slow down the thawing process.

- If you don't have electricity, you may still be able to cook or heat your food. If you have outdoor access, a charcoal grill or propane stove is a viable option (these can't be used indoors because of improper ventilation). If you're stuck indoors, keep a can of Sterno handy: Essentially heat in a can, it requires no electricity and can warm up small amounts of food in cookware.

- If your family has special needs—for example, you take medication regularly or you have a small child—remember to stock up on those essential items, too. Keep an extra stash of baby formula and jars of baby food or a backup supply of your medications.

- If you live in an area at high risk for flooding, consider buying all your pantry items in cans, as they are less likely to be contaminated by flood waters than jars. "It's recommended that people don't eat home-canned foods or jarred foods that have been exposed to flood waters because those seals are not quite as intact," says Andress.