

Winter Power Outage: Are You Prepared?

Without power you quickly lose access to many essentials of modern life. Depending on the time of year and the duration, a power outage can mean the difference between life and death. On the other hand, while a summer wind storm can cause a temporary loss of power and be a major inconvenience and loss of food in the freezer; even a short winter outage in Montana is a risk to humans, livestock, pets and structures.

Are you prepared?

Since you never know when and how long you could be without power here are a few tips to prepare for these three essentials:

1. warmth and comfort
2. cooking and water
3. sanitation, hygiene and health

General

- Prepare an emergency kit (batteries, flashlight, foods, waters, bedding, candles, etc.) for at least 72 hours without power – in isolated rural areas, especially during winter months perhaps longer.
- Safety Comes First! During the winter if you need emergency heating for your home, to decrease the risk of starting your house on fire, getting injured, and being poisoned from toxic fumes; safety is the primary consideration when choosing and using backup heating and cooking systems.

Home Heating Options:

Severe winter storms can cause power outages for a few days or even weeks. Some common alternative sources of home heating are fireplaces, space heaters, wood-burning stove and kerosene heaters. Keep in mind however, for stoves that have blowers, augers to feed fuel-pellets or other electric controls, these appliances will not fully function without electricity. Of course using any non-electrical/utility provided fuel heating system will require an ample supply of wood, pellets, propane, kerosene, etc.

Appliances that should not be used for home heating:

- Charcoal grills
- Unvented shop-type propane space heaters
- Unvented home kerosene heater (unless properly vented)

In the event of a furnace break-down, it is tempting to use appliances that still have electric or gas supply to them. However, using appliances that are not designed for home heating is a dangerous compromise. Appliances that are not designed for home heating include:

- Gas and electric oven and stove
- Gas clothes dryer
- Charcoal grills
- Unvented coal, oil, wood and pellet heaters/stoves

Emergency Cooking. During an emergency, providing hot meals for your family may be difficult. An outdoor camp stove or gas/charcoal grill or indoor fireplace provide heating options. Keep a supply of meal-in-a can (don't forget the can opener) foods such as stews, soups, canned meats, beans, or spaghetti to supplement dry products like powdered milk, cereal, bread, dried meats, and cheeses. Freeze-dried meals for campers and backpackers are often excellent foods that can be prepared with a minimum of heat and water.

Sanitary Facilities.

If your water is shut off for an extend time, sanitation quickly becomes a problem. To prepare for a power and water outage a portable camper-type chemical toilet with plenty of extra toilet paper is a clean alternative. For short outages, conserve the water in the toilet by turning off the water supply at the base of the toilet or disconnect the handle. When flushing is absolutely essential, flush only enough water to avoid toilet clogs. Instruct users to put toilet paper in a separate covered container.

Water Supply.

If you rely on electricity to run your water pump, a power outage will restrict your water use for cooking, drinking, laundry, bathing and flushing the toilet. Prepare for an outage by storing water in large covered containers and in the bathtub. During an outage keep in mind that the water heater, toilet tanks and the household plumbing has a sizable but limited water supply which should be saved for later use. For cooking and drinking prepare by having sealed bottled water on hand.

Home Generators

Today portable and whole-house electric generators are widely available and used to restore power to some home appliances during a power outage. However, if not installed and used properly, can also become a hazard. When selecting, installing and using a portable generator give special attention to how much wattage the generator can accommodate so that it does not overload and malfunction.

- Never use a portable generator indoors. Place outdoors with the exhaust away from vents, windows and doors to prevent carbon monoxide from entering the house.
- Have whole-house generators installed by a qualified electrician

- Never try to power the house wiring by plugging the generator into a wall outlet. For portable generators it is best to plug appliances directly in the generator using a heavy-duty, out-door rated extension cord.
- Have ample fuel available for extended generator use

Freezing Pipes.

Without heat and low temperatures you will have to protect pipes and water sources from freezing. If your water supply has not been discontinued, you can keep water from freezing in the pipes by dripping water from the kitchen and bathroom faucets. If your water supply has been shut off for during freezing temperatures for an extended time considering draining all pipes, including the water heater, toilet tanks furnace boiler, dish and clothes water pumps. If convenient to locate, water equipment such as the water softener and pressure tanks could be covered with blankets, bales of straw or other insulative materials.

In preparation for an outage, it is important to familiarize yourself with your home plumbing and heating systems in advance so you can quickly take action to avoid costly water damage later. During your assessment and preparation, it may also be necessary to install additional drain valves to conveniently access and drain your vital water supplies.

For more information

For more information to prepare for a winter power outage go to www.montanahelp.org