

Emergencies - coping without gas or electricity

Interruptions to your gas or electricity supply can seriously hamper your lifestyle. You may have to think laterally to come up with ways to continue bathing, eating and keeping warm. The following are suggestions you may find useful.

Power blackout – general suggestions

Suggestions include:

- Have an emergency kit prepared (see the 'Devise an emergency plan section' of this fact sheet).
- Switch off all electrical appliances, especially those that have heating elements.
- Unplug 'surge-sensitive' equipment, such as computers and video recorders.
- Keep one light switch turned on so you know when the power returns.
- Telephone your electricity provider for updates on the status of the blackout.
- Turn on a battery-operated radio and listen to a local radio station for information.
- Check on your neighbours to see if they need assistance, particularly if they are elderly or have a disability.

Heat and light

Suggestions include:

- Multiple layers of clothing trap body heat more efficiently than one bulky layer.
- The body loses a great deal of heat through the scalp so wear a hat.
- Close doors, windows and blinds to maintain heat.
- Torches are much safer sources of light than candles. Make sure you have a good stock of batteries.
- If you must use candles, keep them away from draughts and away from children.
- Be aware of fire hazards – keep candles away from curtains and other flammable objects.
- Make sure to extinguish all candles before retiring for the night.

Food storage

Foods such as poultry, meat and dairy products must be kept chilled. If you are without electricity and the use of your refrigerator, suggestions include:

- Try to keep cold and frozen food cold. If food is still cold to touch, less than 5°C, it is safe to use.
- Once cold or frozen food is no longer cold to touch, 5°C or above, it can be kept and eaten for up to four hours and then it must be thrown away or, if it is raw meat, it should be cooked and eaten.
- Eat hot food within four hours of it being hot or throw it away.
- If power is restored when frozen food is still cold to touch, less than 5°C, the food is safe to refreeze.
- Choose foods that don't require refrigeration, such as bread, spreads, fruit, vegetables and canned products.
- You could try extending the life of your perishables by storing them temporarily in an Esky or car fridge.

Preparing food

Most recipes can be adapted to other cooking processes – for example, rice and pasta can be cooked in the microwave. Suggestions include:

- If you have no gas, cook foods in the microwave or other electrical appliances. Check manufacturer's instructions for further details and suggested cooking times.
- Remember that microwave ovens cook foods unevenly. Always stir at various times throughout the cooking process and allow for 'standing time'.
- If you have neither gas nor electricity, cook foods outside on the barbecue. Never use a barbecue inside a home, tent or caravan.
- Use foods that don't require cooking, such as salad vegetables, tinned meats, breads and breakfast cereals.

Washing and bathing safely

If hot water is not available for up to 24 hours then it is appropriate not to wash, unless hygiene is a particular issue. If hygiene is an issue, disposable baby wipe products that are not soap based may be used without water.

For longer periods of disruption to gas or electricity supplies, you may need to find alternative means of heating water. Suggestions include:

- If you have electricity but no gas, use the microwave, electric hotplates and kettles to heat water.
- If you have gas but no electricity, use your gas hot water system or gas hotplates.
- If you have neither, use the barbecue to heat water outside. Never use a barbecue inside a home, tent or caravan.
- Take special care when heating water in unfamiliar ways. Check the manufacturer's instructions to reduce the risk of injuries.
- If you need to carry containers of hot or boiling water, don't overfill them and make sure to insulate the handles to prevent scalds from steam. Keep children well away.
- Before bathing, check the temperature of the water. Don't attempt to 'top up' with hot or boiling water when someone is already sitting in the bath.

Looking after your baby or young child

Parenting without gas or electricity can be tricky, particularly where food preparation and hygiene are concerned. Suggestions include:

- Maintain personal hygiene after changing nappies or before handling food by washing your hands with soap and cold water.
- Use disposable instead of cloth nappies.
- If you can't boil bottles, sterilise them in commercially prepared disinfecting solutions. Follow the instructions on the manufacturer's label.
- If you have electricity, run bottles through the dishwasher.
- Don't use the microwave oven to warm up your baby's bottle, as you risk scalding. It is fine to give your baby cold milk.

Devise an emergency plan

Your family should devise an emergency plan in case of interruptions to power or gas. Suggestions include:

- Keep emergency numbers by the telephone.
- Have an emergency kit already packed. This should include a radio, torches, batteries, and copies of insurance and other important papers, bottled water, some tinned food and first aid kit.
- Ensure that any medication is accessible.
- Your radio should be portable and battery-operated.
- Make sure each member of the household knows to turn off electrical appliances and unplug sensitive equipment when there is a blackout.

Where to get help

- Your electricity supplier
- Your gas supplier
- State Emergency Service Victoria Tel. 132 500

Things to remember

- During a blackout, switch off all electrical appliances (especially those that have heating elements) and unplug 'surge-sensitive' equipment such as computers and video recorders.
- Your family should devise an emergency plan in case of interruptions to power or gas.

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DHS - Emergency Management

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