Power outages

Most power outages will be over almost as soon as they begin, but some can last much longer – up to days or even weeks. Power outages are often caused by freezing rain, sleet storms and/or high winds which damage power lines and equipment. Cold snaps or heat waves can also overload the electric power system.

During a power outage, you may be left without heating/air conditioning, lighting, hot water, or even running water. You could also be left without phone service. If you do not have a battery-powered or crank radio, you may have no way of monitoring news broadcasts.

You can greatly lessen the impact of a power outage by taking the time to prepare in advance. You and your family should be prepared to cope on your own during a power outage for at least 72 hours. This involves three basic steps:

1) Finding out what to do before, during, and after a power outage.
2) Making a family emergency plan, so that everyone knows what to do, and where to go if you need to leave your home.
3) Getting an emergency kit, so that you and your family can be self-sufficient for at least 72 hours during a power outage.

Preparing your home

- You can install a non-electric standby stove or heater. Choose heating units that are not dependent on an electric motor, electric fan, or some other electric device to function. It is important to adequately vent the stove or heater with the type of chimney flue specified for it. Never connect two heating units to the same chimney flue at the same time.
- If you have a wood-burning fireplace, have the chimney cleaned every fall to eliminate creosote build-up. This build-up can ignite and cause a chimney fire.
- If the standby heating unit can use the house gas supply, have it connected with shut-off valves by a certified tradesperson.
- Before considering the use of an emergency generator during a power outage, check with furnace, appliance and lighting fixture dealers or manufacturers regarding power requirements and proper operating procedures.

Emergency preparation for people with disabilities and special needs

- Consider how you may be affected in a power outage.
- Know your evacuation route (without elevator service, if applicable)
- Plan for a backup power supply for essential medical equipment
- Have a flashlight and a cell phone available
- Establish a self-help network to assist and check on you during an emergency
- Enroll in a medical alert program that will signal for help if you are immobilized
- Keep a list of facilities that provide life-sustaining equipment or treatment
- Keep a detailed file of your medical condition(s) and treatment(s)
- If you live in an apartment, advise the property management that you may need assistance staying in your apartment or that you must be evacuated if there is a power outage. This will allow the property manager to plan and make the necessary arrangements on your behalf.
During a power outage

- First, check whether the power outage is limited to your home. If your neighbours’ power is still on, check your circuit breaker panel or fuse box. If it is not a breaker or a fuse, check the service wires leading to the house. If they are obviously damaged or on the ground, stay at least 10 meters back and notify your electric supply authority. Keep the number along with other emergency numbers near your telephone.
- If your neighbours’ power is also out, notify your electric supply authority.
- Turn off all tools, appliances and electronic equipment. Turn the thermostat(s) down to minimum to prevent damage from a power surge when power is restored. Power can be more easily restored when there is not a heavy load on the electrical system.
- Turn off all lights, except one inside and one outside. This will let hydro crews outside know if power has been restored.
- Don’t open your freezer or fridge unless it is absolutely necessary. A full freezer will keep food frozen for 24 to 36 hours if the door remains closed.
- Never use charcoal or gas barbecues, camping heating equipment, or home generators indoors. They give off carbon monoxide. Because you can’t smell or see it, carbon monoxide can cause health problems and is life-threatening.
- Use proper candle holders. Never leave lit candles unattended and keep out of reach of children. Always extinguish candles before going to bed. House fires due to candles increase during power outages.
- Listen to your battery-powered or wind-up radio for information on the outage and advice from authorities.
- Make sure your home has a working carbon monoxide detector. If it is hardwired to the house’s electrical supply, ensure it has a battery-powered back-up.
- Protect sensitive electrical appliances such as TVs, computer, and DVD players with a surge-protecting power bar.

How can I protect my home if we have to evacuate?

Evacuation is more likely during winter months, when plummeting temperatures can make a house uninhabitable. If your home must be evacuated, protect it by taking the following precautions:

- Turn off the main breaker or switch of the circuit-breaker panel or power-supply box.
- Turn off the water main where it enters the house. Protect the valve, inlet pipe, and meter or pump with blankets or insulation material.
- Drain the water from your plumbing system. Starting at the top of the house, open all taps, and flush toilets several times. Go to the basement and open the drain valve.
- Drain your hot water tank by attaching a hose to the tank drain valve and running it to the basement floor drain. If you drain a gas-fired water tank, the pilot light should be turned out. Call the local gas supplier to re-light it.
- Unhook washing machine hoses and drain.
- Do not worry about small amounts of water trapped in horizontal pipes. Add a small amount of glycol or anti-freeze to water left in the toilet bowl, and the sink and bathtub traps.
- If your house is protected from groundwater by a sump pump, clear valuables from the basement floor in case of flooding.
When the power returns

You may be tempted to return to life as usual when the power is turned back on. Take a few minutes to do the following checks to ensure your safety and to protect your belongings.

- Do not enter a flooded basement unless you are sure the power is disconnected.
- Do not use flooded appliances, electrical outlets, switch boxes or fuse-breaker panels until they have been checked and cleaned by a qualified electrician.
- Replace the furnace flue (if removed) and turn off the fuel to standby heating units.
- Switch on the main electric switch. Ensure appliances, electric heaters, TVs, microwaves, computers, etc., are unplugged to prevent damage from a power surge.
- Give the electrical system a chance to stabilize before reconnecting tools and appliances. Turn the heating-system thermostats up first, followed in a couple of minutes by reconnection of the fridge and freezer. Wait 10 to 15 minutes before reconnecting all other tools and appliances.
- Close the drain valve in the basement.
- Turn on the water supply. Close lowest valves/taps first and allow air to escape from upper taps.
- Make sure that the hot water heater is filled before turning on the power to it.
- Check food supplies in refrigerators, freezers and cupboards for signs of spoilage. If a freezer door has been kept closed, food should stay frozen 24 to 36 hours, depending on the temperature. When food begins to defrost (usually after two days), it should be cooked; otherwise it should be thrown out.
- As a general precaution, keep a bag of ice cubes in the freezer. If you return home after a period of absence and the ice has melted and refrozen, there is a good chance that the food is spoiled. When in doubt, throw it out.
- Reset your clocks, automatic timers, and alarms.
- Restock your emergency kit so the supplies will be there when needed again.

For more information on hazards in Alberta, contact your municipality’s Director of Emergency Management or the Alberta Emergency Management Agency at 780-422-9000 (Dial 310-0000 for toll-free access outside Edmonton) or visit www.aema.alberta.ca