When the Power Goes Out

A Practical Start · Preview · 2026 edition

Plan power, water, food and safety for a multi-day outage, in an apartment or a house, before you spend money.

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Free checklists: outagedepot.com/checklists

1. How to use this preview

This preview is for you if you're about to spend real money on backup power and want to know first whether you need it, in an apartment or a house.

It does four things:

1. **Shows you what breaks, and when**, using only what public agencies say.
2. **Has you build a load list:** the things in your home that need power, and how many hours a day you need each one.
3. **Shows the math** for turning that list into a runtime estimate, so a spec sheet can't talk you into the wrong size.
4. **Gives you a Buy / Borrow / Skip frame** for backup power, with separate answers for apartments and houses.

It also covers the basics for any outage or storm: water, food, heat and cold, first aid, alerts, and carbon monoxide.

What it doesn't do. It doesn't name products or brands, and it doesn't tell you what to buy. It isn't medical, electrical or legal advice. For medical devices, talk to your medical provider and the device maker (section 10). For anything wired into your home, use a qualified electrician.

How it's built. Every fact comes from a public agency, named next to the fact. Where an agency says "may" or "about", so do we. If we couldn't source something, we left it out.

Where to start. Do the load list in section 3 first.

2. What breaks, and when

In a multi-day outage, the lights are what you notice. The harder part is everything else FEMA lists below, including your phone, your water, the stores and your food.

What can stop. FEMA says a power outage may disrupt communications, water and transportation; close retail businesses, grocery stores, gas stations, ATMs, banks and other services; cause food spoilage and water contamination; and prevent use of medical devices. The Red Cross says an outage "can last for days or longer."

> → **Checklist step:** Write down the three things in your home you'd miss first when the power goes. They go at the top of your load list (section 3).

Your phone, and the alerts on it. The FCC says that in an emergency many more people try to call at the same time, which may create network congestion, and that "In many cases text messages will go through when your call may not." The FCC also says "Cordless telephones usually will not work if there is a power outage."

> → **Checklist step:** Agree on one out-of-area contact with your household, and make texting your first try, not calling.

Your fridge, by hour 4. Federal food safety guidance, citing USDA, says your refrigerator "will keep food safe for up to 4 hours during a power outage," and to discard refrigerated perishable food such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs and leftovers after 4 hours without power. The same guidance says a full freezer will hold a safe temperature for "approximately 48 hours (24 hours if it is half full and the door remains closed)."

> → **Checklist step:** Keep a fridge thermometer and a freezer thermometer in place now, so you're reading a number later, not guessing.

Your water. FEMA says an outage may disrupt water and cause water contamination. If you live in an apartment building, ask your building manager how water reaches your floor and what happens to it when the power goes. (New York City readers: see the box in section 14.)

> → **Checklist step:** Store water before you need it (section 8 has the amounts).

Your medicines. FEMA says that if the power is out for more than a day, discard any medication that should be refrigerated, unless the drug's label says otherwise, and consult your doctor or pharmacist immediately for a new supply. FEMA also says an emergency can make it difficult for people to refill a prescription or to find an open pharmacy.

> → **Checklist step:** Ask your pharmacist now how long each of your refrigerated medicines can be stored out of the fridge, and write the answer on your household card.

After a hurricane. FEMA: "You may not have access to these supplies for days or even weeks after a hurricane."

> → **Checklist step:** Gather the supplies on the checklists before a storm is in the forecast.

3. Your load list (worksheet)

FEMA's first step is simple: "Take an inventory of the items you need that rely on electricity." That inventory is your load list.

How to fill it in

1. **Device.** List every device you'd want to keep running: phones, a radio, a router, a laptop, lamps, a fan.
2. **Watts.** Find each device's power draw in watts. It's usually printed on the label, the power brick or in the manual. If you can't find it, write "check manual" and come back to it. Don't guess.
3. **Hours a day.** Be honest. A router all day; a laptop for a workday; a lamp for the evening.
4. **Watt-hours a day.** Multiply watts by hours. That's the energy the device needs each day.
5. **Non-power option.** The Red Cross says to "Consider both back up and non-power alternatives for lighting, communication, … cooking, garage doors, locks and elevators." If there's a way to do the job without power, write it here.

Worksheet A: Load list

#	Device	Watts (from label or manual)	Hours a day	Watt-hours a day (watts × hours)	Non-power option?
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
	Total watt-hours a day				

Read your list before you go on.

- **Only phones and a radio on it?** You may only need small batteries, not a big purchase.
- **A router, a laptop and lamps?** That's a specific job. Do the math in section 5 before you spend.
- **Anything that heats or cools** (a space heater, a hot plate, an air conditioner, a fridge)? Copy its watts from the label and run them through section 5 before you count on any battery to run it.

> → **Checklist step:** Fill in Worksheet A, then tape it inside a cupboard door. It's the list you'll test against later.

4. Watt-hours in plain terms

Two numbers matter.

Watts (W) is how hard a device pulls power right now. It's usually on the label, the power brick or the manual.

Watt-hours (Wh) is how much energy a battery stores. It's the number that tells you how long a battery can run your load list. The FAA says newer lithium ion batteries have the Wh rating marked on them, and "To calculate Wh, multiply the battery voltage by the Amp hours (Ah)."

If the label only shows mAh. Many small batteries are labelled in milliamp-hours (mAh). Divide by 1,000 to get amp-hours (Ah). Then use the FAA's method: multiply the Ah by the voltage printed on the battery.

Wh = (mAh ÷ 1,000) × volts

Example numbers, not a specific product: a battery labelled 10,000 mAh at 3.7 V → 10 Ah × 3.7 V = 37 Wh.

The 100 Wh line. The FAA says spare lithium ion batteries, including power banks, "must be carried in carry-on baggage only," and rechargeable lithium ion batteries are limited to "a rating of 100 watt hours (Wh) per battery" (with airline approval, you may also carry up to two spare larger ones, 101–160 Wh; airlines may set stricter limits). If you might leave by air, check the Wh on every battery you'd pack.

> → **Checklist step:** Find the Wh (or the mAh and volts) on every battery you already own, and write it on a strip of tape on the battery.

5. Your runtime estimate (worksheet)

Here's the math.

Runtime (hours) ≈ battery watt-hours ÷ device watts, then plan on less.

Why "plan on less". You won't get every watt-hour on the label out of a battery, and how much less depends on the battery and the device. We haven't found a public agency figure for that loss, so we don't print one. Treat every runtime as an **estimate**, and use the maker's manual for its own figure.

Example numbers, not a specific product:

- A 1,000 Wh battery running a 50 W device: 1,000 ÷ 50 = about 20 hours **before** losses. Plan on less.
- For a phone and a power bank, the useful number is how many times the bank actually recharged your own phone in a test (section 13).

Worksheet B: Runtime estimator

Line	What to write	Your numbers
1	Total watt-hours a day from Worksheet A	
2	How many days you want to cover	
3	Line 1 × line 2 = watt-hours you need **before** losses	
4	Battery capacity you have, or are considering, in Wh	
5	Line 4 ÷ line 1 = days it might cover **before** losses (an estimate)	
6	The maker's own loss or efficiency figure, if its manual gives one	
7	Your test result: how long it actually ran your devices (section 13)	

Read your result.

- If line 5 is far below line 2, shorten the load list first: cross off anything with a non-power option, and run the numbers again.
- Trust line 7 over line 5. A test with your own devices beats any estimate.

> → **Checklist step:** Fill in lines 1 to 5 in pencil. Line 7 comes after your test run.

6. Buy / Borrow / Skip for backup power

Find your home type at the top of the table, then read down your column. Every Skip has its reason next to it.

Option	Apartment	House
Small power banks for phones	**Buy** one for each adult who relies on a phone. FEMA lists "a portable charger or power bank" among the alternative power sources to plan for.	**Buy**, same reason.
Battery power station	**Buy only for a specific job** on your load list (router, work laptop, lamps). **Skip** if your list is just phones and a radio.	Same rule: a specific job, or skip it.
Borrow first	**Borrow** a friend's or neighbor's battery station for a test run with your own devices before you spend.	Same.
Fuel generator (gas, propane, dual fuel)	**Skip.** CDC's rule is outside, more than 20 feet from windows, doors and vents. Many apartments have no spot like that. See the CO page.	**Education only, in this preview.** If you already own one or are weighing one, read the CO page (section 11) and the box below first. We don't recommend buying one here.
Whole-home or standby system	**Skip** if you rent.	Have a qualified electrician do any wiring into the house. OSHA says never connect a generator to a building's wiring unless a qualified electrician has properly installed it with a transfer switch (box below).
Gas oven or stovetop for heat	**Skip.** CDC: "Never heat your house with a gas oven." FEMA: "Do not use a gas stove or oven to heat your home."	**Skip**, same sources.
Candles as your main light	**Skip.** The Red Cross says: "Use flashlights, not candles."	**Skip**, same source.

For houses: if you run a fuel generator

- **Never indoors or in the garage.** CDC: "Never use a generator inside your home or garage, even if doors and windows are open."
- **Far from the house.** CDC: "Only use generators outside, more than 20 feet away from any windows, doors, and vents." FEMA adds "attached garages" to that list.
- **It can build up fast.** CPSC says that when used in a confined space, generators "can produce high levels of CO within minutes."
- **Never plug it into a wall outlet.** CPSC: "NEVER try to power the house wiring by plugging the generator into a wall outlet, a practice known as 'backfeeding.'" CPSC says this presents an electrocution risk to utility workers and neighbors.
- **Wiring it to the house is an electrician's job.** OSHA: never attach a generator directly to the electrical system of a structure "unless a qualified electrician has properly installed the generator with a transfer switch."
- **Cords.** CPSC: use heavy-duty extension cords "specifically designed for outdoor use," with a wattage rating that exceeds the total wattage of everything connected.
- **Keep it dry.** FEMA: "Touching a wet generator or devices connected to one can cause electrical shock."
- **Fuel.** CPSC: "Never store fuel for your generator in the home." FEMA: "Let the generator cool before refueling."
- **CO alarm.** CDC: "When using a generator, use a battery-powered or battery backup CO detector in your home."

> → **Checklist step:** Mark your column on this page. If it says Skip, cross that option off your list now, and spend your effort on the load list instead.

7. Cover the small jobs first

Most jobs on a load list are small: a phone, a radio, a light, a router. Cover those first.

Your fridge doesn't have to be on the list. Plan around the hours you already have. FEMA says to keep freezers and refrigerators closed and to "Use coolers with ice if necessary." The Red Cross says to eat your fresh, perishable foods first.

Light doesn't have to come from your big battery. FEMA: "Have flashlights for every household member."

> → **Checklist step:** Put a flashlight where every person in your home can reach one in the dark, before you buy anything bigger.

8. Water and food

Water. FEMA: "Store at least one gallon of water per person per day for several days, for drinking and sanitation." "In very hot temperatures, water needs can double." The Red Cross's home figure is longer: "one gallon per person, per day (3-day supply for evacuation, 2-week supply for home)."

- Use food-grade water storage containers, as FEMA says, and replace water that hasn't been commercially bottled "every six months."
- A way to treat water if the tap isn't safe: boil it, or use unscented household bleach or water disinfection tablets exactly as CDC and the label direct. CDC: "Bring clear water to a rolling boil for 1 minute (at elevations above 6,500 feet, boil for 3 minutes)." For bleach, CDC says to "Follow the instructions on the bleach label for disinfecting drinking water."

Food. FEMA: "Store at least a several-day supply of non-perishable food." Choose foods that "do not require refrigeration, cooking, water or special preparation," and "include a manual can opener and eating utensils."

- Federal food safety guidance: "never taste food to determine its safety."
- FEMA: "Throw out food if the temperature is 40 degrees or higher."
- FEMA: "Charcoal grills and camp stoves are for outdoor use only." They give off carbon monoxide (section 11).

Worksheet C: Water and food for your household

Line	What to write	Your numbers
1	People in your home	
2	Days you're planning for (FEMA: several; Red Cross: 2 weeks at home)	
3	Line 1 × line 2 = gallons of water at 1 gallon per person per day	
4	Pets: ask your vet how much water each one needs, and add it	
5	Date you stored it + 6 months = replace-by date (non-commercial water)	
6	Days of no-cook food on hand	
7	Manual can opener in the kitchen? (yes / no)	

> → **Checklist step:** Fill in line 3, write the replace-by date on every container you store, and check line 7 today.

9. Heat, cold and first aid

Heat. If an outage takes your air conditioning in a heat wave, a fan may not be enough. FEMA: "Do not rely on a fan as your primary cooling device." The National Weather Service says that at higher temperatures "A fan can make you hotter."

- FEMA's signs of heat stroke include an extremely high body temperature (above 103 degrees F), red, hot and dry skin with no sweat, a rapid, strong pulse, and dizziness, confusion or unconsciousness. "If you suspect heat stroke, call 9-1-1 or take the person to a hospital immediately."
- FEMA: "If air conditioning is not available in your home find a cooling center." The Red Cross says to evacuate if your home is too hot or too cold, and that communities often provide warming or cooling centers and power charging stations.

> → **Checklist step:** Find out now where your nearest cooling center opens and how your city announces it, and write it on your household card.

Cold. FEMA says hypothermia is an unusually low body temperature, and "A temperature below 95 degrees is an emergency." Its signs include shivering, exhaustion, confusion, fumbling hands, memory loss, slurred speech or drowsiness.

- Don't turn to the stove. FEMA: "Do not use a gas stove or oven to heat your home. It increases your risk of carbon monoxide poisoning."

> → **Checklist step:** Set aside warm layers and blankets for each person, in one place you can find in the dark.

First aid and medicines. FEMA's basic kit includes a "First aid kit," and its list of extras includes "Prescription medications" and "Prescription eyeglasses and contact lens solution." The Red Cross lists "Medications (7-day supply) and medical items."

> → **Checklist step:** Put a first aid kit and a written list of everyone's medicines and doses in one place, and ask your pharmacist or clinician how to keep an extra supply.

10. If someone at home uses a powered medical device

FEMA says a power outage may prevent use of medical devices. Plan this with the people who know the device.

- **The FDA says to read your device's instructions or call your device maker to find out whether it can run on batteries.**
- FEMA: "Talk to your medical provider about a power outage plan for medical devices powered by electricity and refrigerated medicines."
- The FDA says to notify your electric company and fire department that you have a medical device that needs power.
- The FDA says that when the power is restored, check that your device's settings haven't changed, because "often medical devices reset to a default mode when power is interrupted."
- The FDA: "If you depend on your device to keep you alive, seek emergency services immediately."

> → **Checklist step:** Write the device maker's phone number, your clinician's number and your utility's number on your household card this week.

11. Carbon monoxide: the page we never cut

> Never run a generator, grill, or camp stove indoors or on a balcony next to a window. They give off carbon monoxide, which can kill and which you can't see or smell. Install a battery CO alarm.

What it is. CDC: "Carbon monoxide (CO) is an odorless, colorless gas that can cause sudden illness and death if inhaled."

Why sleep matters. CDC: "People who are sleeping, drunk, or under the influence of other substances can die from CO poisoning before they have symptoms."

Where it comes from. CDC: "CO is found in fumes produced any time you burn fuel in cars or trucks, small engines, stoves, lanterns, grills, fireplaces, gas ranges, or furnaces."

The symptoms. CDC: "The most common symptoms of CO poisoning are headache, dizziness, weakness, upset stomach, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion."

The rules, word for word.

- CDC: "Never use a generator inside your home or garage, even if doors and windows are open."
- CDC: "Only use generators outside, more than 20 feet away from any windows, doors, and vents."
- FEMA: "Generators, camp stoves or charcoal grills should always be used outdoors and at least 20 feet away from windows."
- CDC: "Never use a portable gas camp stove indoors."
- CDC: "Never heat your house with a gas oven."
- CDC: "Never burn charcoal indoors."
- CDC: "Never run your car or truck inside a garage that is attached to a house, even with the garage door open."

The alarm. CDC: "Install battery-operated or battery back-up CO detectors near every sleeping area in your home." CPSC says to install a CO alarm that meets the requirements of the current UL 2034 safety standard. Test and replace your alarm as its manual says.

If you feel sick. CPSC: "Get to fresh air right away if you start to feel dizzy or weak." If you rent and there's no CO alarm near a bedroom, ask your landlord.

> → **Checklist step:** Stand at each bedroom door and check there's a working CO alarm near it. If there isn't, that's the first gap to close.

12. Alerts when the power is out

- **Phone alerts need no sign-up.** FEMA says Wireless Emergency Alerts look like text messages, "are not affected by network congestion," and "there is no need to subscribe." FEMA also says some phones require you to enable them. FEMA also says older phones may not be able to receive them.

- **Have more than one way to hear.** FEMA: "Be sure to have several ways to receive alerts." FEMA's basic kit lists a "Battery-powered or hand crank radio and a NOAA Weather Radio with tone alert."
- **Keep a line that doesn't need wall power.** The FCC suggests at least one corded telephone that isn't dependent on electricity, and charged batteries for your wireless phone.

> → **Checklist step:** Open your phone's settings and confirm emergency alerts are turned on, on every phone in your home.

13. Test it before you need it

A plan you've never run is a guess. Pick one evening:

1. Switch off the lights you'd lose and use only what's on your load list.
2. Run each battery you own with the devices you'd really use, and write down how long it lasted (Worksheet B, line 7).
3. Find every flashlight in the dark.
4. Read your household card out loud. Is every number on it?

Worksheet D: Household card (keep a paper copy)

Item	Write it here
Out-of-area contact (name, number)	
Meeting place if you can't get home	
Your utility's outage number	
Building manager or landlord	
Pharmacist; medicine list location	
Clinician and device maker (if a medical device is used at home)	
Nearest cooling or warming center, and how it's announced	
Where the water, flashlights and first aid kit are	
CO alarm near every sleeping area? (yes / no)	

> → **Checklist step:** Do the test evening this month, and put the date of the next one on your calendar.

14. If you live in New York City

If you live in New York City

- **Water in tall buildings.** NYC Health says that in buildings with more than six floors, "pumps push water to rooftop tanks where the water is stored until needed." Ask your building manager what happens to your water when the power goes.
- **CO alarms are the owner's job.** NYC Emergency Management: "NYC law requires owners to provide and install at least one approved carbon monoxide alarm within 15 feet of the primary entrance to each sleeping room." If yours is missing, ask your landlord.
- **Heaters.** NYC Emergency Management says kerosene heaters and propane space heaters "are dangerous and illegal in New York City."
- **If you suspect CO poisoning.** NYC Emergency Management: "Open windows. Leave your home. Get to fresh air immediately. Call 911."

> → **Checklist step:** If you rent in New York City, check the CO alarm near each bedroom door today, and tell your landlord if one is missing.

15. Next steps: the free checklists

You now have a load list, a runtime estimate, your Buy / Borrow / Skip column, and a household card. The next step is the free 72-hour and 7-day checklists and the wallet card. They're free, there's no sign-up, and they turn this preview into a list you can tick off.

Find them at outagedepot.com/checklists.

Sources

Every fact in this preview comes from one of these public agencies. Search the agency's name and the page name to read it yourself. Loaded Oct 17, 2026.

- FEMA: Power Outages · Water · Food · Build a Kit · Extreme Heat · Winter Weather · Hurricanes · Alerts
- CDC: Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Basics · Emergency water treatment page
- U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC): Portable Generator Safety Alert · Carbon Monoxide Questions and Answers
- OSHA: Using Portable Generators Safely
- Federal Aviation Administration (FAA): PackSafe, Lithium Batteries
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA): Tips about Medical Devices and Natural Disasters
- Federal food safety guidance (cites USDA): Food Safety During Power Outage
- National Weather Service: Heat Illness
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC): Tips for Communicating in an Emergency
- American Red Cross: Power Outage Safety · Emergency kit supplies page
- NYC Emergency Management: Carbon Monoxide (New York City box)
- NYC Health: Drinking Water Tank Inspection Reporting (New York City box)

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