Hot days can really take a toll on our refrigerator. If you are like me, you always have someone prowling in the refrigerator for something to eat. Open the refrigerator and that cold air pours out, warming the temperatures inside the appliance. This can cost you money in spoiled food and in electric bills as the refrigerator returns to cooler temperatures.

A temperature of 33 to 40 degrees is ideal for the home refrigerator. The lower the temperature within this range, the longer dairy products and other highly perishable foods will remain top quality. Higher temperatures result in decreased shelf life for most foods. Keep an appliance thermometer in the refrigerator to monitor the temperature.

An Audits International study of temperatures in home refrigerators in 1999 found that 37 percent did not meet the recommended temperature for food safety. Of the refrigerators tested, 27 percent were above 41 degrees, 8 percent were above 45 degrees and 2 percent were above 50 degrees.

The Partnership for Food Safety Education found only 20 percent of consumers use a refrigerator thermometer, and just 30 percent have heard they should use one. So I’m telling you — it is a good idea to use a refrigerator thermometer to keep your refrigerator at the correct temperature.

If it is too cold, produce freezes, costing you money. If it is too warm, other food spoils. Buy a simple refrigerator thermometer for $5 to $8 and keep an eye on it to make sure your temperature is 33 to 40 degrees.

We all heard of the problems that Galena residents had with spoiled foods when the flood cut off electricity to homes. They had to discard everything that was refrigerated or frozen.

But we often have times during the year when power is interrupted or even times when that freezer gets unplugged. What tells us whether the food in the refrigerator or freezer must be discarded?
Know what to do when the power goes out. Keep refrigerator and freezer doors closed to conserve the cold and follow these rules of thumb.

- Food kept at room temperatures (meals, buffets, on the cabinet) should be discarded if it is out longer than two hours.
- Refrigerators will keep food at safe temperatures about four hours after the power goes out.
- A freezer will keep food frozen for two days if full, one day if half full.

Freezers should be kept at zero. Buy a second thermometer to monitor your freezer.

If a power outage hits you and you think it will be several days before your power is restored, duct tape the freezer door. That will keep the cold in and will keep people from “browsing” and letting out the cold air.

How do you know if food is still safe when the power comes back on? Of course, everything still frozen is fine. Those that are partially frozen, check the food for ice crystals. If it still has ice crystals, there is no problem. Refreeze it.

It is totally thawed, that might be a concern. In short, if it is still cold (refrigerator temperatures), it can be refrozen but the quality of the product might not be as good as it once was. If you aren’t sure, give us a yell at 474-2426 and we’ll help you figure it out.

Food safety is important throughout the year. Don’t make your family sick by keeping food at incorrect temperatures or throw out good food because you aren’t sure it is safe. Use a thermometer and know what the correct storage temperatures are.

Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.