

9-9-11 *Goodnight Irene*

Hurricanes leave more than fallen trees, crushed cars and smashed houses in their wake. They also leave public health problems that are not necessarily seen immediately after the power has been restored. While the power was out people scurried to get coolers and ice, if they did not prepare that the day before. The day after the storm a man was telling me, as he emerged from Walmart, “No ice anywhere! Not at the convenience stores, not at the supermarket, not even at the liquor store!” Yes, it was challenging to keep our food from spoiling. The owners of restaurants and food stores handled power outages in a variety of ways. Some cleared the food out of open chests and used dry ice in the units with doors. That caused some customers to wonder what they did with the other food. Large places had refrigerated trucks out back the night before, just in case. The small places were able to use generators and coolers, like homeowners were doing. In the end, though, there was food in the “danger zone” of 40 to 140 degrees for more than two hours requiring all that food to be tossed out.

Did anyone eat food after it was in the danger zone? I don’t know but it must be tempting for people with low incomes who can’t count it as a business loss. It is truly not worth it, though. Foodborne illnesses can leave a child on dialysis and cause a pregnant woman to miscarry. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates “that foodborne diseases cause approximately 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations, and 5,000 deaths in the United States each year.”

When areas such as Plympton are dependent on well water, a power outage means far more than no television. No power means we lose the ability for the water to be pumped into the house. This is a time when people wish they had an old fashioned hand pump. It is very challenging, indeed, to avoid sanitation problems without water. You quickly appreciate how nice it was have instant water and how easy it was to use a wrist or elbow to lift a faucet handle. Even if you set up containers of water in the bathroom and kitchen for washing hands, the hands have to touch the container or the spigot before they are clean. Sanitizing wipes are a godsend but sanitizing does not replace washing.

When tiny invisible small amounts of bacteria or virus remain on the hands, our safe food becomes the vehicle to transport those germs down into our gut where they meet up with their favorite niche: a dark and warm place. Once their requirements are met, they quickly multiply, causing the body to attempt to rid itself of the poison. Most people don’t take themselves to the doctor when they are suffering from vomiting and diarrhea. Even if they do and even if the doctor wisely tests, it does not tell us the food was the cause. Our own hands could have been the cause.

It is gross enough to deal with hand washing when the power is out, but when the pump isn't working for the well water, the toilet can't even be flushed! Well, it can, but only if enough water is poured down there all at once. Then it will flush by gravity. This brings us back to the need for even more water. When we have warning, we fill the tub and pots and pans and barrels with water, hoping that we'll have enough for toilet flushing as well as washing. When that runs out, we wish we had conserved all the wash water for toilet flushing. After a few days of no power and no water thanks to Hurricane Bob, my children and I ran outside with containers when it started raining. We celebrated and cheered for the same stuff that we would usually complain about.

Lack of sanitation, spoiled food, scarcity of clean water and reduced sewerage capacity quickly bring us to the conditions that half the world's population lives in all the time. Having that experience can help us to understand rather than judge countries where millions of children die each year from gastrointestinal disease. Gastrointestinal diseases from bugs such as the rotavirus or E. coli are on the list so-called "preventable diseases" but it not easy to provide water and sanitation to remote areas lacking electricity. After larger natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis, sanitation issues become a larger and longer lasting disaster than the original causative event.

Add disposal problems to the domino list of hurricane hazards. Waste disposal is another luxury that we take for granted. Ordinarily we don't throw away food. For one aspect of public health, we have to dispose of the spoiled food. For other aspects of public health, all that food waste would ideally go to composting and/or rendering and all those containers would be emptied, cleaned and recycled. On our usual day to day scale of operations, we can accomplish that. On a large scale, the landfills are going to receive huge amounts of waste that should not be there. I am going to add landfills to my list of things to be grateful for in this country.

We can sing the song and say goodnight to Irene but we can't say goodbye just yet.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. You can reach her at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us