



Cumbria and Lancashire Health Protection Unit.

Information for Residents on flooded homes or returning to flooded homes

General advice on protecting against infection

The floodwater affecting your home or other property may have been contaminated with sewage, animal waste and other contaminants. However infection problems arising from floods in the UK are actually rare. Although harmful micro-organisms in flood water are very diluted and present a low risk there are a few precautions to be aware of when dealing with flooding which should prevent unnecessary additional health problems. If you follow the basic advice below you should not experience any additional health problems.

- Floodwater and sewage often leaves a muddy deposit. However, experience from previous flooding and sewage contamination has shown that any risk to health is small. (You do not need any booster immunisations or antibiotics.)
- Health risks can be minimised by taking general hygiene precautions and by the use of protective clothing (waterproof boots and gloves) whilst cleaning up.
- Always wash your hands with soap and clean water after going to the toilet, before eating or preparing food, after being in contact with flood water, sewage or items that have been contaminated by these, or participating in flood cleanup activities.
- Don't allow children to play in flood-water areas and wash children's hands frequently (always before meals). Wash floodwater-contaminated toys with hot water or disinfect before allowing them to be used.
- Keep any open cuts or sores clean and prevent them being exposed to flood water. Wear waterproof plasters.
- Harmful gut bacteria such as *E. coli* O157 may be present in sewage and animal slurry, and this can pass into flood water, although there is likely to be substantial dilution. If anyone does develop a tummy upset following direct flooding or contact with sewage they should seek medical advice
- If the floodwater contained oil, diesel etc this should in the main be removed with the floodwater and silt. Any remaining oil, diesel etc contamination in accessible areas can be removed by using a detergent solution and washing the surface down after initial cleaning has been carried out. In inaccessible areas such as under floorboards it may present an odour problem but is not necessarily a health hazard. Further advice should be sought from Environmental Health if the odour persists or if you are particularly concerned about it for other reasons.

While in the property floorboards, walls etc will continue to dry out. Any loose material and dust resulting from this should be vacuumed up on a regular basis.

Very young children should avoid playing directly on timber floorboards or any damaged tiled floors if possible - be aware of the risk of injury from sharp edges on tiles or raised nails in the floorboards until these have been repaired.

Help for vulnerable and elderly people returning to their houses is available from your Social Services Dept.

Contact your Doctor if you become ill after accidentally ingesting (swallowing) mud or contaminated water and tell him your house was flooded.

Gardens and play areas

- Do not let young children play on affected grassed or paved areas until they have been cleaned down and restored to their normal condition.
- Sunlight and soil help destroy harmful bacteria and any excess risk to health should disappear completely within a week or so. (The best way of protecting health is always to wash your hands before eating or preparing food)

If the inside of your home is affected

- Remove all soft furnishings and fittings that are damaged beyond repair.
- Remove dirty water and silt from the property including the space under the ground floor if you have wooden floors. This space may need pumping out.
- Wash down all hard surfaces with hot soapy water until they look clean.
- Allow to thoroughly dry - this will also help to destroy germs left behind.
- Heating and good ventilation will assist the drying process.

Clothing and bedding

- Clothing, bedding and other soft/fabric articles including children's toys etc should be laundered on a hot wash (60°C or the highest temperature indicated on manufacturer's instructions) which will destroy most germs that may be present. Other soft furnishings that have been contaminated and cannot be put in a washing machine will have to be professionally cleaned or, if this is not possible, may have to be disposed of.

Returning to your home

- It is recommended that you only fully re-occupy your home once the above cleaning has been carried out. There may be additional works to be carried out eventually as advised by your insurance company, housing officer, landlord, builder etc. If you decide to return to your home before this further work is completed you should:

Try to have some heating on at all times. Consider the use of a dehumidifier. Ensure the property is well ventilated. Leave windows open as much as possible but remember security!

Ensure that if you have air-bricks to any under floor spaces that these are unblocked to give cross ventilation to these areas.

Food preparation and storage

- Don't eat any food that has been covered by or come into contact with sewage or floodwater.
- Wash your hands before and after preparing food.
- Ensure all surfaces that food will come into contact with are sound and disinfected. If work tops and other areas show signs of damage, avoid food contact with these areas. Particularly make sure that the shelves including those in your refrigerator where food is stored are cleaned and disinfected.
- Use boiled water which has then been allowed to cool to wash food which is eaten raw. It is safe to use unboiled tap water in the preparation of food which is to be cooked. It is safe to use unboiled tap water for cooking if it will be boiled during the cooking process.
- Food preparation surfaces should be wiped down using hot unboiled tap water containing washing-up-liquid, and dishes and other utensils should also be washed in hot unboiled tap water containing washing-up-liquid.
- Caterers should seek detailed advice from Environmental Health Officers (EHOs).
- Try to keep any opened food in an enclosed box or tin.
- All crockery, pots and pans should be thoroughly washed with hot soapy water before using. If any of these are badly chipped or damaged do not use. You could use a food safe disinfectant to sanitise them after cleaning.
- Frozen food that has been at ambient temperature for a few hours should be discarded. Put contaminated flood-damaged food in black plastic refuse sacks, seal and put out when your next refuse collection is due. Check with insurers before disposal. Don't be tempted to try and salvage damaged food - including tins as they may be contaminated with sewage and chemicals left from the floodwater.

If your drinking water becomes contaminated

- People whose water comes through a mains supply should follow the advice of the local water company regarding the safety of their water supply. Water companies have a duty to take all necessary steps to protect public health. If a water treatment works becomes flooded alternative supplies are normally available but consumers may be advised to boil water before drinking or temporarily refrain from using water for domestic purposes.

If you notice a change in water quality, such as the water becoming discoloured or there is a change in taste or smell, or if you are unsure, ring your local water company. If in doubt boil all water intended for drinking or use bottled water.

If you have been advised to boil your water, then boil all water for drinking, brushing teeth, washing food and making ice.

- If your water is a private supply such as a well or spring, then check that it has not been affected by the floodwater. If a private well or spring has been covered by floodwater, if the water changes colour or taste, or you believe the supply has been affected by the flood then boil (or otherwise treat) the water. Continue to boil the water until the supply has been tested and shown to be safe. Boiling water kills pathogenic bacteria, viruses and parasites that may be present in water. Bring the water to the boil and then allow it to cool before drinking. It can be stored in a clean jug covered by a saucer in a cool place (preferably in the fridge). Ice should be made from water prepared for drinking.
- Water from the hot tap is not suitable for drinking.
- Ensure the water taps are cleaned and disinfected before using them for the first time.
- Only safe high quality water should be used for dental surgery.

If there is a bottle-fed baby in the house make sure their water is boiled and do not use bottled water unless it is recommended by a doctor or health visitor. Some bottled water is unsuitable for babies as it has too many salts for their immature kidneys to manage.

Remember the following

- Replace manhole covers dislodged by the flood.
- Don't switch on electrical appliances, which have been in contact with floodwater unless a competent electrician has checked them. Your local Electricity Board will be checking main supplies.
- Ensure that the house is properly aired to encourage drying.
- Make sure that any mould growth is properly treated.

Finally

Both physical stress associated with overexertion in cleaning up premises and mental stress caused by temporary relocation may make you feel unwell. Indeed the major health hazard of floods comes from all the stress and strain of the event, not infection. If you feel unwell this does not necessarily mean that you are suffering from any infection. If you are concerned - visit your own doctor.

(This advice published on the Health Protection Agency web-site <http://www.hpa.org.uk>)