

General Advice

The physical devastation that accompanies a flood is enormous. But as the flood waters recede, there may be more threats to your personal health and safety. By taking some basic precautions, you can help prevent many injuries as well as the possibility of some diseases.

In the midst of all this water, remember that cold can play a major role in your personal health. Do not add weather-related health problems like hypothermia to your other problems.

The weeks after a flood are going to be rough. In addition to your physical health, you need to take some time to consider your mental health as well. Remember that some sleeplessness, or anxiety, anger, hyperactivity, mild depression, or lethargy are normal, and may go away with time. If you feel any of these symptoms acutely, seek some counseling.

Specific Advice for those returning to flooded premises or homes

How to Avoid Illness

Always wash your hands with soap and water before preparing or eating food, after toilet use, after participating in flood cleanup activities, and after handling articles contaminated with flood water or sewage. If you receive a puncture wound or a wound contaminated with feces or soil, have a doctor or health department determine whether a tetanus booster is necessary.

How to Make Sure Your Food is Safe

Do not eat any food that may have come into contact with flood water. Thawed food can usually be eaten or refrozen if it is still "refrigerator cold," or if it still contains ice crystals. To be safe, remember, "When in doubt, throw it out." Discard any refrigerated or frozen food that has been at room temperature for two hours or more, and any food that has an unusual odor, color, or texture. Do not use any food that has been in contact with flood water including canned goods

How to Make Sure Your Water is Safe

Flooded, private water wells will need to be tested and disinfected after flood waters recede. Questions about testing should be directed to your local environmental health department.

Safe water for drinking, cooking, and personal hygiene If you use bottled water, be sure it came from a safe source. All tap water is free from contamination and can be used for all purposes.

Use a bleach solution to rinse containers before reusing them after flooding. Use water storage tanks and other types of containers with caution. This applies particularly to pans and utensils used in cooking or food preparation

How to Deal With Chemical Hazards

Be aware of potential chemical hazards you may encounter during flood recovery. Flood waters may have buried or moved hazardous chemical containers of solvents or other industrial chemicals from their normal storage places. Car batteries, even those in flood water, may still contain an electrical charge and should be removed with extreme caution by using insulated gloves. If you are worried about a major chemical contamination contact the fire and rescue service for advice in the first instance.. Avoid coming in contact with any acid that may have spilled from a damaged car battery.

How to Deal with Electric and Gas Utilities

Electrical power and natural gas should be shut off to avoid fire, electrocution, or explosions until it is safe to use them. Use battery-powered flashlights and lanterns, rather than candles, gas lanterns, or torches. If you smell gas or suspect a leak, turn off the main gas valve, open all windows, and leave the house immediately. Avoid any downed power lines, particularly those in water. All electrical equipment and appliances must be completely dry before returning them to service. It is advisable to have a certified electrician check these items if there is any question.

How to Clean Up

Walls, hard-surfaced floors, and many other household surfaces should be cleaned with soap and water and disinfected with a solution of 1 cup of bleach to five gallons of water. Wash all linens and clothing in hot water, or dry clean them. For items that cannot be washed or dry cleaned, such as mattresses and upholstered furniture, air dry them in the sun and then spray them thoroughly with a disinfectant. Steam clean all carpeting. If there has been a backflow of sewage into the house, wear rubber boots and waterproof gloves during cleanup. Remove and discard contaminated household materials that cannot be disinfected, such as wallcoverings, cloth, rugs, and drywall.

When returning to your home after a flood, be aware that flood water may contain sewage. Protect yourself and your family by following these steps:

Inside the Home

- Keep children and pets out of the affected area until cleanup has been completed.
- Wear rubber boots, rubber gloves, and goggles during cleanup of affected area.
- Remove and discard items that cannot be washed and disinfected (such as, mattresses, carpeting, carpet padding, rugs, upholstered furniture, cosmetics, stuffed animals, baby toys, pillows, foam-rubber items, books, wall coverings, and most paper products).
- Remove and discard drywall and insulation that has been contaminated with sewage or flood waters.
- Thoroughly clean all hard surfaces (such as flooring, concrete, molding, wood and metal furniture, countertops, appliances, sinks, and other plumbing fixtures) with hot water and laundry or dish detergent, then disinfect with a solution of 1 cup of household bleach to 5 gallons of water. (Note: this solution should not be used for drinking, cooking, or personal hygiene.)
- Help the drying process by using fans, air conditioning units, and dehumidifiers.
- After completing the cleanup, wash your hands with soap and water.
- Wash all clothes worn during the cleanup in hot water and detergent. These clothes should be washed separately from uncontaminated clothes and linens.
- Wash clothes contaminated with flood or sewage water in hot water and detergent. It is recommended that a laundromat be used for washing large quantities of clothes and linens until your onsite waste-water system has been checked. Seek immediate medical attention if you become injured or ill.

Outside the Home

- Keep children and pets out of the affected area until cleanup has been completed.
- Wear rubber boots, rubber gloves, and goggles during cleanup of affected area.
- Have your onsite waste-water system professionally inspected and serviced if you suspect damage.
- Wash all clothes worn during the cleanup in hot water and detergent. These clothes should be washed separately from uncontaminated clothes and linens.

After completing the cleanup, wash your hands with soap and water.

- Seek immediate medical attention if you become injured or ill.

Flood waters and Personal hygiene

Flood waters may contain fecal material from overflowing sewage systems, and agricultural and industrial byproducts. Although skin contact with flood water does not, by itself, pose a serious health risk, there is some risk of disease from eating or drinking anything contaminated with flood water. If you have any open cuts or sores that will be exposed to flood water, keep them as clean as possible by washing well with soap to control infection. If a wound develops redness, swelling, or drainage, seek immediate medical attention.

In addition, parents need to help children avoid waterborne illness. Do not allow children to play in flood water areas, wash children's hands frequently (always before meals), and do not allow children to play with flood-water contaminated toys that have not been disinfected. You can disinfect toys using a solution of one cup of bleach in 5 gallons of water.