

After a flood: returning home safely

Community information

When returning to your home after a flood, take precautions to reduce the possibility of injury, illness or disease.

Before going onto your property consider the following:

- Gas or electricity supplies may be damaged – these hazards need to be confirmed safe by a qualified electrician or plumber.
- The structural integrity of your home and structures may be affected – this needs to be declared safe by a qualified building surveyor.
- Keep children and pets away until the clean-up is completed.
- Swimming or playing in floodwater is hazardous due to the risk of drowning and potential skin infection through open wounds coming into contact with the floodwater.

On site hazards may include the following:

- If gas has collected inside buildings do not smoke or use matches, lighters or other open flames. If possible, use flashlights or other battery-operated lights instead of candles.
- Wear sturdy waterproof boots and rubber or leather gloves. Wild animals including rodents, snakes or spiders may be trapped in and around your home. Cuts from broken glass and debris are also a problem.
- Mosquitoes can breed rapidly and become a nuisance – cover your skin with light coloured clothing with long sleeves and pants, and use insect repellent.
- Pets and other animals may have died and need to be removed. For advice on safe disposal speak to your local council or vet.
- Buildings may have asbestos-containing material. Take all necessary precautions when handling asbestos-containing debris. Where there is extensive demolition, repair and renovation work involving asbestos-containing material, licensed asbestos workers should be employed to do the work.
- Flooding can cause excessive mould growth, which must be cleaned up before moving back to your home.
- Flooding may cause sewage to overflow inside your home. Contaminated areas must be cleaned and disinfected.
- Drinking water may be contaminated – do not drink any water unless you know it is safe.
- Food may be contaminated, or spoiled due to a power failure.

Cleaning up

The following explains how you can protect you and your family when cleaning up after a flood event.

Personal hygiene is essential

A number of infectious diseases, including gastrointestinal infections and hepatitis A, can spread through contact with surfaces contaminated by flood waters. The likelihood of illness increases when floodwater contains faecal material (poo) from overflowing sewage systems, agricultural or industrial wastes.

Never use contaminated water to wash dishes, brush your teeth, wash your hands, wash and prepare food, make ice or prepare baby formula. Local water authorities will advise you if the tap water is unsafe.

Always wash your hands with soap and safe water and use water that has been boiled or disinfected:

- After clean-up activities.
- After handling articles contaminated with floodwater or sewage.

If boiled or disinfected water is not available, you can use alcohol-based lotion or gel products to disinfect your hands.

If you have any open cut or sore that has been exposed to floodwater:

- Keep it as clean as possible by washing with soap and covering it with a sticking plaster.
- Contact a doctor for further treatment advice (such as if a tetanus shot is needed).
- If redness, swelling or discharge occurs get immediate medical attention.

To prevent illness:

- Do not allow children to play in floodwater areas.
- Wash children's hands frequently (always before meals).
- Do not allow children to play with flood-damaged toys until toys have been disinfected.

Preventing illness from water

- Local water authorities will tell you if tap water is safe for use.
- An aboveground rainwater tank that has not been inundated with floodwater or damaged should be okay to use.
- If you suspect your private water supply **is contaminated with chemicals**, boiling will not make it safe to drink – **use only bottled water**.

Boiling or disinfecting water can make water safe to drink.

- **If boiling water** bring to a boil by heating the water until a continuous and rapid stream of air bubbles is produced from the bottom of a pan or kettle. Kettles with automatic cut-off switches are suitable. Care should be taken to avoid scalding injuries.
- **To disinfect water**, add $\frac{3}{4}$ of a teaspoon (4 mL) of chlorine household bleach into a clean household bucket of water (10 L). Avoid bleaches that contain detergents or perfumes. Stir the water well and let it stand for 30 minutes before using it.

Children and elderly people are particularly at risk from dehydration. Ensure they drink plenty of safe water (disinfected or bottled water) until the drinking water supply is declared safe.

For infants, use bottled water to make up powdered formulas and use pre-prepared canned baby food.

Toys suitable for cleaning should be washed using a solution of 1.5 cups of household bleach in 10 L of cold water (a household bucket) for two minutes. Rinse in clean water and let the toys air dry after cleaning.

Managing sewage overflow inside your home

Flood water can contain sewage which contains harmful bacteria and viruses. Keep children and pets away from sewage-affected areas until it has been cleaned up. Appropriate clean-up procedures include:

- Use rubber gloves and boots, and eye protection.
- Throw away contaminated household materials that cannot be cleaned or disinfected, such as carpet and children's soft toys.
- Clean and disinfect all contaminated areas with hot water and detergent, then disinfect.
- Do not use high-pressure water jets on asbestos-containing materials.
- Clean cooking utensils and work surfaces using the bleach solution described above.
- Leave hard surfaces wet for 10 minutes before rinsing with clean water.
- Disinfect cleaning mops, brooms and brushes with the bleach solution.
- Clean and dry dirty footwear and wash your clothes separately after clean-up.
- Wash your hands and any affected parts of your body with soap and water.

Preventing illness from food

After a flood, throw away:

- Food that has come into direct contact with floodwater.
- Any food that has an unusual odour, colour or texture.
- Perishable foods (including meat, poultry, fish, eggs or leftovers) that have been left above 5 °C for more than four hours.
- Canned food if the can is open, bulging or damaged.
- Food containers with screw-caps, snap-lids, crimped caps (soft drink bottles), twist caps, flip-top lids and home canned foods.

To clean cans that are sealed, not bulging and intact which have come into contact with flood-water:

- Remove the labels.
- Wash the cans.
- Dip them in the bleach solution for two minutes.
- Relabel the cans with a waterproof marker pen.

If the **power is on**, refreeze or cook food that has thawed but contains ice crystals and is below 4 °C. If the **power is off**, store food safely by keeping the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible. Add block or dry ice to your fridge if the power is likely to be off longer than four hours. Wear gloves when handling ice.

For further information

- If you or anyone in your family feels unwell, seek medical advice from your local doctor.
- For further advice contact the Environmental Health Unit at the Department of Health and Human Services on 1300 761 874.
- For advice, information and safety precautions relating to the handling of asbestos go to:
www.asbestos.vic.gov.au