

# Cleaning up after a flood – health advice



Information in this leaflet is designed to help you if you need to clean up your home following flooding. Some basic precautions are all that is necessary to protect your health – infection problems arising from floods in the UK are rare. If you follow the advice in this leaflet, you should be able to avoid any additional health problems for you and your family as a result of clearing up.

The main health hazard following flooding comes from the stress and strain of the event, not from infections. Take some time to consider your mental health and approach the clean up without overexerting yourself and in this way you will avoid additional physical stress.

## **Always remember:**

Floodwater affecting your property may have been contaminated with sewage. Although any bugs in floodwater will have been very diluted and present a low risk you should always:

- Wear protective clothing – waterproof boots, apron and gloves – while cleaning up. Cover any open cuts with waterproof plasters.
- Wash your hands with soap and water after being in contact with floodwater or items that have been contaminated and always wash your hands before eating or preparing food.

## **Returning home**

It is recommended that you only fully reoccupy your home once it has been thoroughly cleaned and disinfected and allowed to dry out. Remember your electricity and gas supplies may have been affected. Turn off all the power sources and get advice from your supplier/s or a qualified electrician or CORGI gas fitter before use.

## **General cleaning**

- Thoroughly clean all hard surfaces (including walls, appliances, floors, furniture etc) and disinfect them with a solution made up with hot water and an ordinary detergent based household cleaning agent.
- Wash all soft fabric items (bedding, linen, clothing, soft furnishings, children's toys etc on a hot wash at the recommended temperature on detergent manufacturer's instructions – which will destroy any germs. Items that cannot be put in a washing machine should be dry cleaned.
- Remove and discard items which are damaged beyond repair
- After cleaning, allow to dry thoroughly, which will also help to destroy any germs left behind. Use fans, air conditioners, heaters and dehumidifiers, if available, to help the drying process but bear in mind the advice below under "heating and ventilation."
- Wash all clothes worn during clean up activities in hot water and detergent and wash them separately from uncontaminated clothes and linens.

## **Food**

- **Discard any food which has been in contact with sewage or floodwater.** Don't be tempted to try and salvage damaged food, including tins which may have been contaminated. Discard frozen or chilled food which has been at ambient temperature for a few hours.
- Ensure all surfaces where food will be stored or prepared have been cleaned with hot water and detergent and disinfected, including shelves in your refrigerator.
- All crockery, cutlery and cooking utensils should be thoroughly washed with hot soapy water and disinfected with a food-safe disinfectant, ideally in a dishwasher if available, before using.
- **Wash your hands before and after preparing food.**

## **Water**

- **Follow the advice of your local water company regarding the safety of the water supply.** If the house has flooded then the water is safe up to the stopcock. To ensure it is safe to drink from the tap the water needs running for 3 minutes
- If it appears to be clean the process to follow is that first the tap needs disinfecting with household bleach and any residual disinfectant rinsed away
- The water must then be boiled before drinking.
- This water can be used to make up infant feeds
- Once the flood water has been cleared away and the situation returned to normal there will no longer be a need to boil the drinking water for adults and children
- If there is any possibility the water supply has been affected, you will be advised to boil water before drinking by the water company.
- If you notice a change in water quality, like discolouration or a change in taste or smell, contact your local water company. If in doubt, boil all water intended for drinking.
- Ensure water taps are cleaned and that water is run through them thoroughly before using them for the first time.
- If your water is a private supply rather than mains, it is very important to check that it has not been affected by flood water. If the supply has become contaminated with flood water or changes colour or taste, boil or otherwise treat the water before drinking.

### Children

- Keep children and pets out of affected areas until clean-up has been completed.
- Wash children's hands frequently – and always before meals.
- Wash flood water-contaminated toys with hot water and detergent. Some toys can be cleaned by being put inside pillow cases and into ordinary clothes washing machines.

### Gardens and play areas

- Do not let children or pets play on affected grassed or paved areas until they have been cleaned.
- Remove any toilet waste from affected areas and after the grass has grown and been cut once, there should be no further risk.
- Sunlight and soil will help destroy harmful bacteria and outdoor areas will be safe to use within a week or so after flooding.

### Heating and ventilation

- It is important to ensure your home is properly heated and ventilated to assist the drying process. However, remember that petrol or diesel generators, dehumidifiers, pressure washers and patio-type gas heaters should never be used indoors
- **without adequate ventilation.** The exhaust gases contain carbon monoxide which can quickly build up to poisonous levels without proper ventilation. Also be aware of the increased fire risk and take extra care when using such items.

### Chemical hazards

- Be aware that flood waters may have moved or soaked into containers of chemicals, solvents and other industrial items from their normal storage place.
- If you have any concerns about the safe disposal of chemicals or contaminated water contact the Environment Agency on 0845 988 1188 or visit their website <http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/>
- In general avoid contact with water and materials which may have been chemically contaminated. If it becomes necessary to handle this material, wear rubber gloves, boots and a disposable apron.
- Avoid enclosed areas that may be chemically contaminated, such as garages and cellars where hazardous fumes may build up. Ensure such confined areas are adequately ventilated and are not accessible to children and animals.

### Further advice and information

For more information, visit the Health Protection Agency's website at [www.hpa.org.uk/flooding](http://www.hpa.org.uk/flooding) or contact your local flood support line on **0845 988 1188**