

Returning to Your Home After a Flood

When returning home after a flood evacuation it is important to remember that the water may have created safety hazards in and around your house. Use this information to help you avoid illness and injury as you assess damage.

Entering for the First Time

Never enter a flooded area until local authorities give approval. They are more aware of unseen hazards near your home.

If you have access to a camera, take numerous photos to document the damage for your insurance company before any clean up begins.

Pregnant women, the elderly, children and pets should avoid affected areas in the home until cleanup is complete so they are not exposed to chemical fumes or airborne mold.

Examine the Structure

Do not enter your home if there is standing water around the exterior walls because you will not be able to determine whether the house is structurally sound. Consult with a professional before entering.

Examine porch roofs and overhangs to be sure they still have all their supports. Look for gaps between the steps and the house. The floor is not safe if supports or portions of the foundation wall are missing or if sections of the ground have washed away. Have a building inspector check the house before entering if there is any obvious damage.

Check the ceiling for signs of sagging. The ceiling might be holding water and could be very heavy. If a door sticks at the top, the ceiling may be ready to fall. Use caution when forcing doors open and wait outside the doorway before entering a room where the door was forced open.

Water-damaged floors can collapse under a person's weight. Avoid walking on sagging floors and watch for loose flooring, holes and nails.

Precautions to Take With Utilities

Try to return to your home during the day so you do not need lights to see. Use battery-powered flashlights and lanterns for light. Do not use candles, gas lanterns or torches. Do not smoke in or around the house.

Natural gas or propane tanks should be shut off to avoid fire or explosions. Turn off the main gas valve, open all windows and leave the house immediately if you smell gas or suspect a leak. Notify the gas company, the police or the fire department. Do not return to the house until you are told it is safe.

Avoid any downed power lines, particularly those in water. In order to avoid electrocution, never turn power on or off while standing in water. If you see frayed wiring or sparks, or if there is an odor of something burning but no visible fire, you should immediately shut off the electrical system at the circuit breaker.

All electrical equipment and appliances must be completely dry before you use them.

Have a certified electrician check your possessions if you have any questions about their usability.

Consult your utility company about using power generators. It is dangerous (and against the law in many locations) to connect generators to your home's electrical circuits without the approved, automatic-interrupt devices. A generator can become a major fire hazard if it is online when electrical service is restored.

In addition, the improper connection of a generator to your home's electrical circuits may endanger line workers helping to restore power in the area.

Have your home waste-water system professionally inspected and serviced if you suspect damage.

Cleanup and Disinfecting

Wear rubber boots, waterproof gloves and goggles during cleanup, especially if there has been a backflow of sewage into the house. A tight-fitting mask is helpful if you will be cleaning moldy areas.

Walls, hard-surfaced floors and other household surfaces should be cleaned with soap and water and disinfected with a solution of one cup of bleach to five gallons of water. Never mix bleach or products containing bleach with ammonia or products containing ammonia. Consider getting a professional to remove mold if it covers more than 10 square feet.

Be particularly careful to thoroughly disinfect surfaces associated with food such as counter tops, pantry shelves and refrigerators. Areas where small children play should also be carefully cleaned. Help the drying process by using fans and dehumidifiers in your home.

Wash all linens and clothing in hot water or have them dry cleaned. 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.

Remove and discard contaminated household materials that cannot be disinfected. These items include saturated mattresses, carpeting, carpet padding, rugs, cosmetics, food items, stuffed animals, pillows, foam-rubber items, books, wall coverings and most paper products.

Throw away any food items—even canned goods—that were submerged in water.

After completing the cleanup, wash your hands with soap and warm water. Wash the clothes you wore while cleaning in hot water and detergent. Wash these clothes separately from uncontaminated clothes and linens.

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.

If any propane tanks (20-lb. tanks from a gas grill or household propane tanks) are discovered, do not attempt to move them yourself. These represent a very real danger of fire or explosion. Contact the police or fire department if you find one.

Car batteries may still contain an electrical charge and should be removed with extreme caution by using insulated gloves. Avoid coming in contact with acid that may have spilled from a damaged car battery.

Immunizations

Outbreaks of communicable diseases after floods are unusual. However, the rates of diseases that were present before a flood may increase because of decreased sanitation and overcrowding among displaced persons. Specific recommendations for vaccinations are typically determined by local and state health departments.

If you receive a puncture wound, or a wound is contaminated with feces, soil or saliva, have a doctor determine if you should get a tetanus booster shot.

Contact a doctor if you become ill after returning to your home or during the cleaning process.

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