

Cleaning Up After a Flood

Once flood conditions have ceased and the floodwaters have receded, it is important to restore your home to pre-flood conditions, as soon as possible, in order to protect your health and prevent further damage to your house and personal belongings. There are different areas of your home and environment that will need to be restored. If you have property insurance, it is important to contact an insurance adjuster before initiating any remediation of your home. While you are cleaning, there are certain precautions you can take to protect your health:

- Wear protective clothing such as rubber gloves, rubber boots, masks, and protective eyewear.
- Wash your hands frequently, especially after direct contact with contaminated items or after removing gloves.
- Change your clothes and shower after working in a contaminated area.
- Avoid carrying dirt and contamination from your boots to other parts of your home.

Electrical Hazards

It may be unsafe to enter a flooded area unless the electrical supply has been turned off. Shut the electricity to a flooded area off at the fuse box or electrical panel. If the electrical panel is in the flooded area, the electricity should be shut off from the outside of the building. For assistance, call your local electrical utility company. You can avoid electrical shocks by wearing rubber boots and keeping electrical cords out of the water. Do not attempt to use or operate any electrical appliances until you have a chance to inspect the wiring within the premises and ensure the appliance is safe to use.

General Cleaning and Disinfection

If your home has experienced excessive water damage or damage due to sewage contamination, you may need to use professional services to ensure adequate clean up and remediation. The following precautions are recommended to ensure your personal safety before the cleaning process begins:

- Check the perimeter of your house to ensure that there is no structural damage. If you see or suspect structural damage, you may need to contact your local building department for advice.
- If you detect vapours or smell gasoline, natural gas or propane, immediately vacate the property and call your local fire department.

Areas of your home as well as contents that have come in contact with flood waters will need to be thoroughly washed with soap and water. If floodwaters were contaminated with sewage, you will need to disinfect items with a household bleach solution after they have been cleaned. To prepare the bleach solution, mix one cup of bleach with five gallons of water. If you are using a disinfectant other than chlorine bleach, ensure to follow the manufacturer's directions. Concrete surfaces can be cleaned with a solution of TSP (tri-sodium phosphate) and water (one half cup of TSP to one gallon of warm water). Furniture should be washed with soap and water, then left to dry.

Prevention of Mould Growth

The excessive moisture and standing water remaining after a flood may contribute to mould growth in your home. If moisture persists in a structure, mould can start to develop after a few days. The following actions can be taken to decrease moisture and prevent mould growth:

- Use pumps, pails and a wet/dry vacuum to remove water from your flooded home, as soon as possible.
- Open windows and doors for natural ventilation and to assist with the drying process.
- Use fans and a dehumidifier to assist with the drying process.
- Remove any saturated carpet, rugs and upholstered items; allow them to dry in a different location or discard them if they are contaminated with sewage.
- Once you have finished the cleaning process, ensure to continue to ventilate your home and use a dehumidifier.
- Ensure that areas requiring restoration or renovation are entirely dry before beginning new construction.

Drywall and insulation that has been in contact with water should be removed at least half a meter above the high-water line in order to prevent mould growth. Discard these items according to local waste management requirements. If drywall or insulations is removed, set up fans and dehumidifiers to allow thorough drying before new drywall and/or insulation is installed.

Drinking Water Safety

If your drinking water supply is from a private well (dug or drilled) or a cistern that has become flooded, it may be contaminated and is *not safe to consume*. The Health Unit recommends that you:

- Use an alternate source of potable water (i.e. bottled water) for drinking, making infant formula, cooking, brushing teeth, washing produce and any other activities that involve directly consuming the water;
- Rapidly boil the water for at least one full minute before consuming; or
- Disinfect the water prior to consumption by adding two drops of 5% to 6% household bleach per litre of water, stir the water, then allow it to sit for thirty minutes.

Once flood conditions have ceased and the floodwaters have receded, you will need to sample your well water to ensure it is free of harmful bacteria and contamination, before it is safe to use. For more information, see our information sheet *Safe Drinking Water – Before and After a Flood*.

Sewage Disposal

If you rely on a private, on-site septic system, water usage in the home should be conserved as much as possible during flood conditions. When a septic system is flooded, it may not be able to take on any more water or sewage, which can result in sewage backing up into your house. Use your septic system as little as possible until the leaching bed area is no longer saturated and the water level in the bed is lower than the water level around your house.

If there is sewage ponding in your yard, **keep children and pets away** from the area. Sewage contains *E. coli* bacteria, which can be harmful to human health. Once the system dries up, there should not be a problem; the soil works to filter the sewage and bacteria and the risk to human health will be eliminated. If sewage has backed up into your home, follow the general cleaning and disinfection procedure provided above. Remember, some things that cannot be adequately cleaned and disinfected may need to be disposed of – *when in doubt, throw it out*. For more information, see our information sheet *Sewage Disposal Systems – Before and After a Flood*.

Food Safety

There are various food safety concerns that you should be aware of after a flood. If there was a power outage associated with a flood, foods that have been temperature abused will need to be discarded. Foods that have come into contact with floodwaters may also need to be discarded. To protect the health of you and your family, the following precautions are recommended:

- Discard food that has come into contact with flood waters.
- Canned food may be saved if the can appears to be fully intact (not bulging or dented); the can must be washed with soap and water, then sanitized with a household bleach and water solution (1 teaspoon of bleach per 3 cups of water) for one minute. Be sure to re-label the can.
- Food stored in glass jars (i.e. home-made jams and pickles) must be thrown out.
- Throw out any potentially hazardous foods that have been above 4°C (40°F) for more than two hours; this includes meat, poultry, fish, dairy products, eggs, cooked rice and pastas, soups, stews and gravies.
- Refrigerators can keep food cold for four to six hours if the door stays closed.
- Full chest or upright freezers can keep food frozen for up to two days; half-full freezers will usually keep food frozen for one day.
- Clean and sanitize all dishes, cooking utensils and food preparation surfaces that may have come into contact with floodwaters.

If you operate a food premises, there are other precautions and concerns that you may need to consider. For more information, see our information sheet *Food Safety in Food Premises – Before and After a Flood*.

For more information on dealing with various issues related to flooding conditions or for guidance on cleaning up after a flood, visit the Health Unit's website at www.pcchu.ca or call Inspection Services at (705) 743-1000 to speak with a Public Health Inspector.