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NEWS

STORE

PRESS

GOVERNANCE

JOBS

PUBLICATIONS

MUSEUM

Water Treatment

Home English > Services > Disaster Services > Floods

Case Studies
Food Safety
Generators
**Recovering
Financially**
**Chemical
Emergencies**
Earthquakes
Fires
Floods
Heat Waves
Hurricanes
Mudslides
Thunderstorms
Tornadoes
Tsunami
Volcanoes
Wild Fires
Winter Storms
Repairing Your Flooded Home

(PDF File) English

(PDF File) Spanish

What to Do After a Flood or Flash Flood

Your home and its contents may look beyond hope, but many of your belongings can be restored. If you do things right, your flooded home can be cleaned up, dried out, rebuilt, and reoccupied sooner than you think.

Play it safe. The dangers are not over when the water goes down. Your home's foundation may have been weakened, the electrical system may have shorted out, and floodwaters may have left behind things that could make you sick. When in doubt, throw it out. Don't risk injury or infection.

Ask for help. Many people can do a lot of the clean up and repairs discussed in this book. But if you have technical questions or do not feel comfortable doing something, get professional help. If there is a federal disaster declaration, a telephone "hotline" will often be publicized to provide information about public, private, and voluntary agency programs to help you recover from the flood.

Floodproof. It is very likely that your home will be flooded again someday. You can save a lot of money by floodproofing as you repair and rebuild. See Step 8. You should also prepare for the next flood by buying flood insurance and writing a flood response plan.

Table of Contents

 Register for
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Donate

Give Blood

Advocate

Volunteer

Get Trained

 Find Your Local
Red Cross
Enter Zip Code Here:

FIND

 Or Browse Through
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Helping

 ▶ Annual Disaster
Giving Program

Step 1. Take Care of Yourself First

Protect yourself and your family from stress, fatigue, and health hazards that follow a flood.

Step 2. Give Your Home First Aid

Once it is safe to go back in, protect your home and contents from further damage.

Step 3. Get Organized

Some things are not worth repairing and some things may be too complicated or expensive for you to do by yourself. A recovery plan can take these things into account and help you make the most of your time and money.

Step 4. Dry Out Your Home

Floodwaters damage materials, leave mud, silt and unknown contaminants, and promote the growth of mildew. You need to dry your home to reduce these hazards and the damage they cause.

Step 5. Restore the Utilities

The rest of your work will be much easier if you have heat, electricity, clean water, and sewage disposal.

Step 6. Clean Up

The walls, floors, closets, shelves, contents and any other flooded parts of your home should be thoroughly washed and disinfected.

Step 7. Check on Financial Assistance

Voluntary agencies, businesses, insurance, and government disaster programs can help you through recovery.

Step 8. Rebuild and Floodproof

Take your time to rebuild correctly and make improvements that will protect your building from damage by the next flood.

Step 9. Prepare for the Next Flood

Protect yourself from the next flood with flood insurance, a flood response plan, and community flood protection programs. This step also includes sources to go to for additional assistance.

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Hard copies of this information in book form are available from your local Red Cross chapter or by writing:

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The information provided is based on careful research and input from experienced professionals. The reader must assume responsibility for adapting this information to local conditions. This book is not intended to replace the advice and guidance of an experienced professional who is able to view a home and assess the needs of the particular situation. In several instances, the reader is advised to contact a professional if he or she is not experienced with technical matters such as building construction and electrical components.

In some cases, brand names are used as examples. Their usage does not imply an endorsement or recommendation for any particular commercial product.

What to Do After a Flood or Flash Flood

- **Seek necessary medical care at the nearest hospital or clinic.** Contaminated flood waters lead to a greater possibility of infection. Severe injuries will require medical attention.
- **Help a neighbor who may require special assistance--infants, elderly people, and people with disabilities.** Elderly people and people with disabilities may require additional assistance. People who care for them or who have large families may need additional assistance in emergency situations.
- **Avoid disaster areas.** Your presence might hamper rescue and other emergency operations, and put you at further risk from the residual effects of floods, such as contaminated waters, crumbled roads, landslides, mudflows, and other hazards.

- **Continue to listen to a NOAA Weather Radio or local radio or television stations and return home only when authorities indicate it is safe to do so.** Flood dangers do not end when the water begins to recede; there may be flood-related hazards within your community, which you could hear about from local broadcasts.
- **Stay out of any building if flood waters remain around the building.** Flood waters often undermine foundations, causing sinking, floors can crack or break and buildings can collapse.
- **Avoid entering ANY building (home, business, or other) before local officials have said it is safe to do so.** Buildings may have hidden damage that makes them unsafe. Gas leaks or electric or waterline damage can create additional problems.
- **Report broken utility lines to the appropriate authorities.** Reporting potential hazards will get the utilities turned off as quickly as possible, preventing further hazard and injury. Check with your utility company now about where broken lines should be reported.
- **Avoid smoking inside buildings.** Smoking in confined areas can cause fires.
- **When entering buildings, use extreme caution.** Building damage may have occurred where you least expect it. Watch carefully every step you take.
 - **Wear sturdy shoes.** The most common injury following a disaster is cut feet.
 - **Use battery-powered lanterns or flashlights when examining buildings.** Battery-powered lighting is the safest and easiest, preventing fire hazard for the user, occupants, and building.
 - **Examine walls, floors, doors, staircases, and windows to make sure that the building is not in danger of collapsing.**
 - **Inspect foundations for cracks or other damage.** Cracks and damage to a foundation can render a building uninhabitable.
 - **Look for fire hazards.** There may be broken or leaking gas lines, flooded electrical circuits, or submerged furnaces or electrical appliances. Flammable or explosive materials may travel from upstream. Fire is the most frequent hazard following floods.
 - **Check for gas leaks.** If you smell gas or hear a blowing or hissing noise, open a window and quickly leave the building. Turn off the gas at the outside main valve if you can and call the gas company from a neighbor's home. If you turn off the gas for any reason, it must be turned back on by a professional.
 - **Look for electrical system damage.** If you see sparks or broken or frayed wires, or if you smell burning insulation, turn off the electricity at the main fuse box or circuit breaker. If you have to step in water to get to the fuse box or circuit breaker, call an electrician first for advice. Electrical equipment should be checked and dried before being returned to service.
 - **Check for sewage and waterline damage.** If you suspect sewage lines are damaged, avoid using the toilets and call a plumber. If water pipes are damaged, contact the water company and avoid using water from the tap. You can obtain safe water from undamaged water heaters or by melting ice cubes.
 - **Watch out for animals, especially poisonous snakes, that may have come into buildings with the flood waters. Use a stick to poke through debris.** Flood waters flush snakes and many animals out of their homes.
 - **Watch for loose plaster, drywall, and ceilings that could fall.**
 - **Take pictures of the damage, both of the building and its contents, for insurance claims.**
- After returning home:

- **Throw away food that has come in contact with flood waters.** Some canned foods may be salvageable. If the cans are dented or damaged, throw them away. Food contaminated by flood waters can cause severe infections.
- **If water is of questionable purity, boil or add bleach, and distill drinking water before using.** (See information on water treatment under the "Disaster Supplies Kit" section.) Wells inundated by flood waters should be pumped out and the water tested for purity before drinking. If in doubt, call your local public health authority. Ill health effects often occur when people drink water contaminated with bacteria and germs.
- **Pump out flooded basements gradually (about one-third of the water per day) to avoid structural damage.** If the water is pumped completely in a short period of time, pressure from water-saturated soil on the outside could cause basement walls to collapse.
- **Service damaged septic tanks, cesspools, pits, and leaching systems as soon as possible.** Damaged sewage systems are health hazards.

Produced by the National Disaster Education Coalition: American Red Cross, FEMA, IAEM, IBHS, NFPA, NWS, USDA/CSREES, and USGS

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