

Clean Up Safely After a Natural Disaster

When returning to your home after a hurricane, flood, or other natural disaster protect yourself and your family by following these tips.

- **Reentering Buildings**

- Stay away from damaged buildings or structures until they have been examined and certified as safe by a building inspector or other government authority. You may want to wait to return to buildings during daylight hours, when it is easier to avoid hazards, particularly if the electricity is off and you have no lights.
- Leave immediately if you hear shifting or unusual noises that signal that the structure may fall or if you smell gas or suspect a leak. If you smell gas, notify emergency authorities and do not turn on the lights, light matches, smoke, or do anything that could cause a spark. Do not return to the house until you are told it is safe to do so.
- Keep children and pets out of the affected area until cleanup has been completed.

- **General Safety Measures**

- Have at least two fire extinguishers, each with a UL rating of at least 10A, at every cleanup job.
- Wear hard hats, goggles, heavy work gloves, and watertight boots with steel toe and insole (not just steel shank) for cleanup work.
- Wear earplugs or protective headphones to reduce risk from equipment noise.
- Use teams of two or more people to move bulky objects. Avoid lifting any material that weighs more than 50 pounds (per person).
- When using a chain saw, operate the saws according to manufacturer's instructions, wear appropriate protective equipment, avoid contact with power lines, be sure that bystanders are at a safe distance, and take extra care in cutting trees or branches that have gotten bent or caught under another object. Use extreme caution to avoid electrical shock when using an electric chainsaw.
- If there has been a backflow of sewage into your house, wear rubber boots, rubber gloves, and goggles during cleanup of the affected area.
- In hot weather, try to stay cool by staying in air-conditioned buildings, taking breaks in shaded areas or in cool rooms, drinking water and non-alcoholic fluids often, and wearing light and loose-fitting clothing. Do outdoor activities during cooler hours. For more information on protecting yourself against heat-related illness, see the [CDC Extreme Heat website](#).

- **Carbon Monoxide Exposure**

- Never use generators, pressure washers, or other gasoline, propane, natural gas, or charcoal-burning devices inside your home, basement, garage, or camper, or even outside near an open window, door, or vent.
- Carbon monoxide, an odorless, colorless gas from these sources that can cause sudden illness and death, can build up indoors and poison the people and animals inside.

- **Cleanup Issues**

- Remove and discard items that cannot be washed and disinfected (such as mattresses, carpeting, carpet padding, rugs, upholstered furniture, cosmetics, stuffed animals, baby toys, pillows, foam-rubber items, books, wall coverings and paper products).
- Remove and discard drywall and insulation that has been contaminated with sewage or flood waters.
- Thoroughly clean all hard surfaces (such as flooring, concrete, molding, wood and metal furniture, countertops, appliances, sinks and other plumbing fixtures) with hot water and laundry or dish detergent.

- **Electrical Issues**

- If electrical circuits and electrical equipment have gotten wet or are in or near water, turn off the power at the main breaker or fuse on the service panel. If you must enter standing water to access the main power switch, then call an electrician to turn it off.
- Never turn power on or off or use an electric tool or appliance while standing in water.
- Do not connect generators to your home's electrical circuits without the approved, automatic-interrupt devices. If a generator is on line when electrical service is restored, it can become a major fire hazard and it may endanger line workers helping to restore power in your area.

- **Hazardous Materials Issues**

- Call the fire department to inspect or remove chemicals, propane tanks and other dangerous materials.
- Wear protective clothing and gear (for example, a respirator if needed) when handling hazardous materials.
- Wash skin that may have come in contact with hazardous materials.

- Wear insulated gloves and use caution if you have to remove a car battery. Avoid any acid that may have leaked from a car battery.

For information about possible dangers posed by chemicals, see the CDC [Chemical Emergencies page](#). For information about possible dangers posed by pollution from large farms and agricultural facilities, see the [CDC Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations \(CAFOs\) website](#).

- **Hygiene and Infectious Disease Issues**

- After completing the cleanup, wash with soap and water.
- If there is a boil-water advisory in effect, use water that has been boiled for 1 minute (allow the water to cool before washing). Or you may use water that has been disinfected for personal hygiene use (solution of ½ teaspoon of household bleach per 1 gallon of water). Let it stand for 30 minutes. If the water is cloudy, use a solution of ¼ teaspoon of household bleach per 1 gallon of water.
- If you have any open cuts or sores that were exposed to floodwater, wash them with soap and water and apply an antibiotic ointment to discourage infection.
- Seek immediate medical attention if you become injured or ill.
- Wash all clothes worn during the cleanup in hot water and detergent. These clothes should be washed separately from uncontaminated clothes and linens.

For more tips on washing your hands, see [Hand Hygiene in Emergency Situations](#).

- **Water Issues**

- If the building is flooded, the waters may contain fecal material from overflowing sewage systems and agricultural and industrial waste. Although skin contact with floodwater does not, by itself, pose a serious health risk, there is risk of disease from eating or drinking anything contaminated with floodwater.
- If you have any open cuts or sores that will be exposed to floodwater, keep them as clean as possible by washing them with soap and applying an antibiotic ointment to discourage infection.
- To reduce cold-related risks when standing or working in water which is cooler than 75 degrees F (24 degrees C), wear insulated clothes and insulated rubber boots, take frequent breaks out of the water, and change into dry clothing when possible.

For additional information, visit www.health.pa.gov or www.emergency.cdc.gov.