

Staying healthy during and after floods



Dangers of Floodwater

Floodwater and leftover debris may be contaminated with sewage. To prevent illness, contact with floodwater should be minimised. Avoid swimming in rivers, lagoons and estuaries for at least three days after heavy rain.

When cleaning up, remember to look after yourself. Drink plenty of fluids and do not wait until you are thirsty. Have frequent breaks and take care not to get too cold or too hot.

It is normal to feel a mix of emotions in emergency situations and these emotions should pass with time. If you experience a prolonged period of distress, please contact your local doctor.

For further information contact your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055

Drinking Water

Drinking water supplies can be affected by floods. If a 'boil water' alert has been issued in your area, observe it strictly to prevent illness. Water for eating and drinking (including brushing teeth, washing raw food, making ice and pet's drinking water) should be brought to a rolling boil and then allowed to cool. Under no circumstances should non-boiled water be consumed until the alert is lifted. When the 'boil water' alert is lifted, follow the water supplier's instructions about flushing the household water pipes.

If you are not sure about the quality of drinking water, contact your water supplier or local council.

Personal Hygiene

It is critical to practice basic hygiene during the flood and clean-up period. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and clean water after handling flood-affected items or participating in any flood clean-up activities, after going to the toilet and always before handling or eating food.

Avoid coughing or sneezing on others and use only clean eating utensils, toothbrushes, towels or handkerchiefs and avoid sharing these items.

Avoid all unnecessary contact with mud and floodwaters. When carrying out a clean up, always wear solid shoes, not thongs or sandals. Always wear gloves when handling flood-affected items or mud. Keep children out of flood-affected areas.

All cuts and abrasions should be cleaned, treated with antiseptic and covered immediately. If you have a deep cut or wound, if a wound has had contact with floodwaters or if a wound develops redness, swelling or discharge, seek immediate medical attention.

Avoid being bitten by mosquitoes. Use an insect repellent containing DEET, picaradin or lemon eucalyptus oil on exposed skin areas and reapply every couple of hours. Cover up as much as possible with loose-fitting and light-coloured clothing.

Should you or any of your family have severe diarrhoea or vomiting, please seek immediate medical assistance. If you have these symptoms, you'll need extra fluids to replace what you lose. The best fluids to take are those that contain a mixture of special salts (electrolytes) and sugars, which can be purchased from local pharmacies.

Cleaning up your house and yard

Wear suitable **protective clothing** including boots, gloves and eye protection while cleaning up. Be wary of snakes, spiders and rats that may have taken refuge in or near your home.

Electrical equipment and hot water systems that have been exposed to floodwater or water damaged in any way should be inspected for safety by a licensed electrician before use. Floodwater-affected gas appliances and gas bottles should also be inspected by a qualified tradesperson before they are used. Never use an electricity generator indoors.

Wash out mud, dirt and debris from your house with a hose, starting at the highest point and working down to ground level.

Yards should be raked to remove debris. If necessary, hose down the yard (except where water conservation measures are in place) apply hydrated or garden lime and wet down. Lime can be obtained from your local hardware store.

Where possible, remove all wet items such as floor coverings, rugs, mats, furniture, bedding, linen and clothing. If floor coverings are removed, the floor underneath should be thoroughly cleaned and dried before any new material is laid.

Start **drying out the house** as soon as floodwaters recede. On dry days keep all doors and windows open to assist with drying. Fans may also help. Attempt to drain water away from under the house to increase the airflow and assist drying. Check for trapped water or mud in walls or floor cavities.

Mould or mildew may develop if items are not completely dried. Mould or mildew may be removed with household bleach, however the strength of the product may ruin some household items.

Children's toys that are soft or made of moulded plastic with air injection holes that have been affected by floodwaters should be discarded. Solid toys should be washed and disinfected.

Clean all surfaces or equipment that have been affected by floodwaters (eg empty refrigerators and cupboards). Hard-surfaced floors, walls, benches and sinks should be thoroughly cleaned with hot soapy water and then disinfected by wiping or spraying surfaces with a chlorine bleach solution (see below) or a product labelled as a disinfectant. Once disinfected, allow to dry. Always wear gloves and protective clothing and do not touch face or eyes while using disinfectants.

How to make disinfectant

To make up a 10 litre bucket (standard size) of disinfectant, put on gloves, fill the bucket with water and then add **ONE** of the following:

50mls (quarter of a cup) of 4% chlorine (household bleach)

OR

8-16mls (dessert spoon) of 12.5% chlorine (liquid pool chlorine)

Always follow safety advice on labels.

Linen, blankets and clothing should be washed in hot water (if instructions allow) or dry-cleaned.

Flood-affected mattresses are difficult to treat and may need to be discarded. Foam rubber mattresses may be thoroughly washed with a garden hose. A detergent solution should then be squeezed through the mattress before allowing it to dry. Other types of mattresses or furniture, such as lounge chairs, may be air dried in the sun then sprayed thoroughly with a disinfectant solution. Check with a furniture renovating company if you are unsure about their condition.

Be mindful of **food safety** food that has come into contact with floodwater or has an unusual odour, colour or texture should be thrown out.

If power is cut for more than four hours, food stored in the fridge should be disposed. If the freezer door is kept shut, frozen food will not spoil for 24 hours. Never refreeze food that has defrosted during a power failure. The consumption of unsafe food may cause serious illness. If in doubt, throw it out!

If you suspect damage has occurred to your **septic tank** vessel or pipe junctions, have them professionally inspected and/or serviced.

If you use a **water bore** for domestic purposes and that bore has been inundated with floodwater, NSW Health recommends you use an alternative source (eg bottled water or rainwater) or bring the water to a rolling boil before use. If you have continued concerns about the quality of your bore water, please contact your local public health unit.

To avoid creating **mosquito breeding sites** in your yard, empty out pot plant bases, remove all water-holding rubbish and try to encourage drainage from your yard.

Your local council can provide advice on the disposal of dead animals.

If you have any concern about flood-affected **farm chemicals**, contact your local fire brigade.

Additional resources:

- Food safety: <https://www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/consumer/keeping-food-safe/flood-fire-power-cut-emergencies>
- SES After a flood: <https://www.ses.nsw.gov.au/floodsafe/prepare-your-home/after-flooding/>
- Further information contact your public health unit on **1300 066 055**