

**Ask for help.** Many people can do a lot of the clean up and repairs. But if you have technical questions or do not feel comfortable doing something, get professional help from your local fire department, the local disaster hotline, or websites.

**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. (if you smell chemical odors (e.g. gasoline, petroleum...) call authorities).

#### **When entering buildings**

- **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. Open windows as you progress.
- **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.** Substantial 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. If you turn off the gas for any reason, it must be turned back on by a professional. Do not extinguish gas fires, to prevent explosions, but call the fire department.
- **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 and alligators 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.

**Downed Wires. Stay away from all downed wires.** Even if you think they may be phone or cable television wires, stay away from downed lines. Don't step in nearby puddles or attempt to move any object that comes in contact with a wire. Report downed wires immediately to your local public safety authorities. Floodwaters can turn your house into one gigantic live wire. In severe cases, just touching the house could cause electrocution. Do not enter any rooms where outlets are underwater or loose wires are hanging in the water. Electrical wires that have been exposed to salt water should be considered recyclable junk and be replaced.

- **If water is of questionable purity, boil or add bleach, and distill drinking water before using.** 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. *(there are few basements in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama)*

- **Take pictures, if you can, for insurance purposes.**

- **Water and mold damage:** Moisture and heat generate mold growth. In general, if it smells or looks moldy, it is. Steps to take then include:

- 1) drying – moving air, hanging up, etc.
- 2) cleaning – hard surfaces (metal, wood, etc), can be washed with soap and water. If mold is present, use a 10% bleach solution (do not mix with ammonia). If mold regrows on wood, use bleach or consider discarding. Soft surfaces/clothing, etc: wash. If odor or visible mold recurs, discard.

- 3) Discarding if you can't get rid of mold.
- 4) Once walls, floors, etc, have dried out, remove residual mold (drywall, etc). Where wood (studs) and other materials that support mold growth are moldy, replace. Clean non-nutrient surfaces, like concrete floors, with a 10% bleach solution.

- **Chemical hazards:** boiling drinking water with chemicals may concentrate them. Do not drink funny tasting or smelling water. Some chemicals in water may cause skin sensitization or even sun sensitivity: wash with soap and water after working or swimming in water.
- **Electrical hazards:** do not re-enter a house and turn on electricity until cleared by local authorities
  - 1) Turn off all breakers.
  - 2) To turn on main panel, take rubber door mat, double over, and stand on it to turn on breaker. *(put on rubber boots and rubber gloves (e.g. dishwashing gloves) if available)*
  - 3) If system shorts out again, call an electrician.
  - 4) Under no conditions, reverse-wire a generator into your home system
  - 5) If you smell any smoke or something smells hot, turn off all breakers and call electrician
  - 6) Under no conditions, reverse-wire a generator into you home system.

**Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration  
Office of Public Health and  
Environmental Hazards (13)**

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## POST HURRICANE FACT SHEET FOR CLEAN-UP

### Re-entering your home safely and clean-up



*(This brochure provides limited information to begin the process of re-entering flooded buildings. Most importantly, these recommendations are not a complete list of all precautions that should be taken during the re-entry into flooded buildings and they do not supersede recommendations provided by other government agencies.)*

**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, floodwaters may have left behind things that could make you sick, and animals (snakes, alligators) may be hiding.

- When in doubt, throw it out.
- Don't risk injury or infection.
- Don't put your hands or arms in spaces you haven't examined carefully. (flashlight and mirror useful)
- Headache, unconsciousness and death may result from "confined space" hazards that arise from use of diesel, propane, or gasoline tools (chain saws, generators) indoors, decomposition (fecal material, H2S), leaking gas and other explosives.
- Open windows whenever possible.
- Consider structural and electrical hazards.