

Cleaning Up After the Flood

Picking up the pieces and restoring homes and lives in the wake of widespread flood damage is one of the toughest things people who have experienced such trauma ever have to face. Following a flood, it is important to restore your home as soon as possible so your health is protected and further damage to your house and its contents is prevented.

Flood damage is harmful, not only because water causes walls or floors to buckle and supports to weaken, but also because contamination from sewage and other pollutants pose a serious health hazard.

Another potential longer-term danger from flooding is the possible growth of moulds, which may present a health hazard. Moulds thrive in damp conditions, so it is crucial to dry everything quickly.

Following are some tips about what to do and what not to do after a flood.

Before moving back into your house:

- Ensure access to your house is safe, and that there are no downed power lines, road washouts or debris posing a travel danger in your community.
- Complete a perimeter check of your house and note any structural or other damage. If serious, contact the local building inspector or a structural engineer for advice.
- Take photographs and keep a record of the damage for government agencies involved in flood relief efforts.
- Make a list of things you need to have to start cleaning up and repairing damage.
- Organize and develop a recovery plan.
- If you smell volatile fumes such as gasoline, natural gas or propane, leave the property immediately and call your local gas company or fire department.
- Do not attempt to turn the power back on in your home until wiring has been inspected by an electrical inspector or electrician. If the power must be reconnected by BC Hydro, they require a written declaration before restoring service.

Entering your house:

- Stay out of buildings if floodwaters remain around or in the building and ensure that BC Hydro has disconnected the electricity before you enter.
- If the building is primarily water-free, ensure that your main power switch is turned off at the breaker box. If conditions are wet/damp around the breaker box, stand on a dry board and use a dry stick to turn off the switch.
- Keep extension cords out of the water.
- For all heating systems and large appliances, whether they are wood, gas, propane or electric, ensure that you have equipment thoroughly inspected by a qualified technician before using again. If equipment has been submerged in floodwater, you may need to replace some or all parts such as gas control valves, circuit breakers, fuses, filters, blower motors and switches and controls. It is often cheaper to replace this equipment than to try to repair it.
- Inspect the building for buckled walls or floors, and look out for holes or broken glass and other hazardous debris.

- If your well has been flooded, assume that the water in your home is not safe to drink. You will probably have to disinfect your well before it is safe to use it. Check with your local environmental health officer to find out how to do this. If you are on a public water system, listen to your local media for news from the public health authorities on whether or not your water is safe to drink. You can disinfect water by boiling for at least one minute, or by adding one drop of bleach to one litre of water, shaking it, and letting it stand for one minute. For cloudy water use two drops. You can also purify water with chlorine tablets.
- Flooding may cause damage to your sewage disposal field if you use the system before floodwaters have dropped below the distribution trenches in your septic field. Talk to your local environmental health officer before using your septic system after a flood.
- Have floor drains and sump pumps flushed and disinfected.
- Pour two litres of chlorine bleach evenly over any standing water in your home and stir the bleach and water together as much as possible. Repeat every four days as long as the water remains.

Cleaning up:

- Contact your insurance agent to verify if damage caused by flooding is covered by your policy.
- The provincial government's Disaster Financial Assistance program provides funds to replace or restore items essential to a home, livelihood or community service where insurance is not reasonably and readily available. You can obtain an *Intent to Claim form* from local Provincial Emergency Program offices and local government offices.
- If damaged contents must be thrown away, take pictures of the items and make a list of items that have been damaged or lost. Keep track, on a daily basis, of the number of hours you and your family or friends spend cleaning up your property and keep receipts if you have to hire equipment or suppliers to assist you with clean up. This documentation will be useful if you are making an insurance claim or applying for Disaster Financial Assistance.
- Discard food in the freezer or refrigerator, boxed foods, fresh vegetables and fruit, bottled drinks and home preserves, as well as medicines, cosmetics and toiletries if there is water damage.
- Wash and disinfect all dishes and utensils in boiling water or a diluted bleach solution of one part bleach to 10 parts water or a non-ammonia dish detergent.
- Remove water from your flooded home slowly. Drain in stages, about a third of the volume daily. If you remove it too quickly, the walls or floor may buckle.
- If you use a gas or kerosene driven water pump to drain floodwater from your home, make sure you have a way to ventilate exhaust fumes.
- Do not heat your home more than above outdoor temperature until all the water has been removed.
- Open windows and doors to air naturally. Ventilate or dehumidify the house until it is completely dry.
- Clean, disinfect, rinse and dry all surfaces, wall and floor areas of the house that were flooded.
- To avoid inhaling fumes, you may want to wear a charcoal respirator while doing this job.
- Replace drywall and insulation at least half a metre above the high water line.
- Replace flooring that has been deeply penetrated by floodwater or sewage.
- Throw away any loose or batt insulation that was wet. Only rigid foam insulation can be salvaged, after removing, cleaning and drying.
- Attack moulds and bacteria aggressively as they can aggravate allergies, asthma and other health problems. If moulds are present inside the house, clean them up with a chlorine bleach solution (one part bleach to 10 parts water).
- If moulds persist, more drastic measures must be taken. The only way to avoid moulds is to keep surfaces dry and to keep the relative humidity low.
- Clear your yard of debris and refuse left outside by floodwaters, since these will attract animals and insects.
- Check any chemical containers for spillage or water damage, put them in a safe area, and contact your local authority about disposal procedures.