

Protecting Your Health During a Flood

A few simple precautions can help you avoid possible health risks during a flood. This information answers some of the most important questions about floods and your health.

Is my drinking water safe?

Contaminated drinking water can be a significant health concern during a flood, but it depends on your situation.

If you use a community water supply

If you use "city water," the risk of contamination is very low. City wells are generally well protected from flood water. All community water systems are also carefully monitored, by the water supply operator and the state. If your water supply does become contaminated, you will be notified promptly.

If you use a private well

You should assume your private well is contaminated if the well casing was submerged or the flood water came within 50 feet of the well. Water from the well should not be used for drinking or cooking until the well and distribution system have been flushed out, disinfected, and tested for contamination.

- Use bottled water for drinking and cooking until your well is safe to use again.
- For detailed instructions on disinfecting and testing your well, contact the nearest Minnesota Department of Health District Office.

How can I protect my children?

A few simple precautions will help keep your children safe.

- Don't let children play in or near flood water, or in areas that have been recently flooded.
- Wash your child's hands frequently, especially before meals.

- Disinfect toys that may be contaminated, using a solution of two ounces of bleach in one gallon of water.
- Discard any soft toys that may be contaminated with sewage. Young children may put these items into their mouths.

Can contact with sewage or flood water make me sick?

You should always assume that disease organisms may be present in flood water or backed-up sewage. But common sense, combined with basic hygiene, can help you keep the risk low. Skin contact with flood water, by itself, does not pose a health threat unless you have an open wound. The fecal material in sewage contains disease organisms, but it does not pose any risk unless you take it into your mouth. Follow these tips to keep your risks low.

- Always wash your hands thoroughly after working in a contaminated area.
- Always wear rubber gloves and boots to protect your hand and feet.
- Always take a shower after working in a contaminated area.
- Always assume that anything touched by flood water is contaminated.

Do we need to get any shots?

There is usually no increased risk of getting vaccine-preventable diseases, like tetanus or hepatitis A, during a flood. However, those working in clean up may be wounded and exposed to soil that contains the bacteria that causes tetanus. Most people get a tetanus shot that is combined with vaccines for diphtheria and pertussis. Children should have a basic series of four tetanus shots at 2-18 months of age and should receive booster shots at 4-6 years and 11-12 years. Adults should get a tetanus booster shot every 10 years.



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If you get a puncture wound and you haven't had a tetanus shot in the last five years, or you can't remember when you got your last one, or you never got a basic childhood series of at least three shots, ask your doctor if you should get a tetanus shot now.

Hepatitis A shots aren't specifically recommended during floods. The virus is rare in Minnesota and the U.S. and is generally not present in sewage. Hepatitis A vaccine is not even specifically recommended for sewage workers. Having said that, hepatitis A vaccination is open to anyone over 2 years of age who would like to avoid hepatitis A. So go ahead if you want to be vaccinated, but you don't have to be worried about going back to your home or a flood situation without it.

Learn more about immunizations:

<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/immunize/imzffloods.html>

What about private sewage treatment systems?

If the top of your sewage treatment tank was under water, it must be pumped out - to remove all solids and liquids - before you can run sewage into it again. Pumping stations and drop boxes should also be pumped out.

When can I move back in?

After a flood, there may be structural, electrical, or other hazards in your home. Before moving back in check with local authorities for any special guidance, and survey the property for hazards such as those listed below.

- Check for loose power lines and gas leaks.
- Check for obvious structural damage.
- Turn off the gas and electricity.
- Turn off fuel valves for fuel oil or propane.

What can I keep - and what should I throw away?

As a general rule, anything you can't wash and disinfect should be thrown away. Although you may need to use special cleaning methods for items like carpeting and upholstered furniture, it may be possible to salvage them.

What about garbage?

Garbage attracts animals and insects, and rodent activity may increase in flooded areas as these animals seek food and shelter. Don't let garbage pile up. Dispose of all discarded items properly. There will usually be more frequent pick-ups after a flood.

Is my food safe?

Food is generally safe unless it has been in direct contact with flood water, or it hasn't been properly refrigerated, because of power failure. Here are a few simple food safety guidelines.

Clean any canned goods you intend to keep

- Commercially canned foods can be kept if you wash the can first with warm water and detergent, then disinfect the outside of the can, using a solution of two ounces of bleach in one gallon of water. Remove labels when cleaning the cans.

Discard foods that may be contaminated

- Items prepacked in paper, boxes, glass jars, or other non-waterproof packages that may have been in contact with flood water.
- Frozen food that was thawed, and held at room temperature for more than two hours should be discarded.
- Any items with unusual color or odor.

Keep refrigerated food cold

- If your power goes off, your refrigerator will keep food cool for 4-6 hours if left unopened. Try to keep foods as close to 41° F. as possible.

Keep frozen food from thawing

- If your power goes off, your freezer will keep food frozen for one day if the freezer is half full. Up to two days, if the freezer is full and left unopened.

For more information, see Food Safety in Emergencies

(<http://www.health.state.mn.us/foodsafety/emergencies.html>)

And always remember -
If in doubt, throw it out!