

Returning to a Flooded Building

A building that has been damaged by rising floodwater is likely to be a dangerous place. If you are going to enter a building that has been flooded, particularly to clean, use protective equipment including rubber or hard-soled boots, rubber gloves, a N-95 disposable dust mask and a hard hat and safety glasses for overhead work, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS).

Injury is the greatest threat in returning to a home that has been flooded. Among the hazards are electrical and structural dangers, hazardous materials and potential injury to hands, back, knees or shoulders. Children should not be allowed in homes that are being inspected or repaired.

Electrical

If water has come in contact with electrical circuits, and especially if the water rose above electrical outlets, turn off power at the main breaker or fuse on the service panel. Do not turn power back on until electrical equipment has been repaired and inspected by a qualified electrician. Check with your county building inspector. Do not enter flooded areas or wet buildings if the power is on.

Structural

Never assume that water-damaged structures are safe. An engineer or building inspector needs to inspect the building for stability and safety. Leave immediately if shifting or unusual noises signal a possible building collapse.

Household Hazardous Materials

Damaged building materials may contain asbestos and lead-based paint. If you will need

to remove materials that may contain asbestos or be covered with lead-based paint, seek the help of a qualified consultant to aid you in determining what you need to do to remedy your situation.

Floodwaters can cause containers of hazardous materials such as pesticides, fuel or gasoline to spill indoors. If there is a noticeable chemical odor and/or a spilled container indoors, contact your local health department or fire department for help.

Avoid skin contact with contaminated materials or contaminated water and keep the area well ventilated or, even better, play it safe and leave.

Injury

Be careful when handling or lifting heavy loads such as furniture or carpet. To avoid back injury, do not lift loads of more than 50 pounds. Wear rubber boots or hard-soled boots, preferably with steel toes, when working and lifting.

If a building has been flooded to the ceiling or if you are doing work that is higher than your shoulders, you should wear a hard hat and safety glasses or goggles.

Fatigue

You are most likely to be injured when you are tired and not paying attention to common-sense safety issues. Take breaks often and never drink alcohol when you are working in a flood-damaged building.

Health Risks

You may come in contact with biological hazards that could cause illness if you breathe in or swallow contaminants. Some

contaminants such as bacteria or viruses may be left indoors by floodwater, while fungi or mold may grow indoors after the water has receded

Bacteria and Viruses

Some of these microscopic organisms, particularly those from sewage, will be in floodwater, mud and sediment left by floodwater. If you swallow sediment or floodwater, you may develop gastrointestinal (digestive tract) illness. Because there is so much water involved in flooding, the concentration of organisms will be diluted, and the risk of disease is small. To reduce the risks, wear rubber gloves while working, do not eat or smoke in the building and wash your hands frequently.

If you get a cut or a puncture wound that is exposed to floodwater, you will be at some risk of tetanus. You should be vaccinated if you haven't had a tetanus vaccination or "booster" in the last 5 years. People need to receive the tetanus vaccine every 10 years. No other vaccinations are recommended because of flooding.

Fungi (Mold and Mildew)

Many building materials, furniture and other items that stay wet for more than a few days will become moldy. Mold colonies are the fuzzy or patchy white, green, brown or black growths that you will see on wallboard, wood furniture and cabinets, clothing, wall studs, and most other surfaces.

Mold releases tiny spores and other cells into the air that can cause allergic illness such as hay fever (coughing, sneezing, irritated eyes), asthma symptoms or other respiratory illness that can be serious. Some molds may also

produce toxins that could cause numbers of other illnesses. Mold contamination can be quite severe in a flooded building. The risk is greatest for people with allergies, asthma, and the very old or very young.

Exposure will be greatest when you move or disturb moldy materials. Wet the mold with a soapy solution from a sprayer before you move it to reduce the release of spores. Mold can make you sick even after you have sprayed disinfectants to kill it.

If you enter a flood-damaged building, wear a dust mask or respirator to reduce your exposure to mold. Look for a mask with "NIOSH" approval and an N-95 rating. Both of these marks should be on the respirator and the container. Look for the masks at your hardware or home supply store if they are not available from your local health department.

Remember that the masks are disposable and should be thrown away at the end of the day. Read and follow the instructions on the mask package.

The most important thing you can do to protect yourself is to use common sense and be aware of safety and health risks, and do not enter a building that is clearly unsafe. If you have questions or need assistance ask your local health department.

For more information . . .

- Update: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Warns of Hazards of Flood Cleanup Work (<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/flood.html>).
- Repairing Your Flooded Home, American Red Cross (http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster/0,1082,0_570_00.html).