

MAKING CHOICES ABOUT CLEANING

WET CARPET

What can you do with flood-damaged carpet if you don't have home owner's or renter's insurance or your policy won't cover the damage? It depends on the kind of damage you have. Flood damage varies from a little basement seepage or lawn runoff in half-basement apartments, to total submersion in sewage-contaminated flood water lasting for days or weeks. If the latter is the case, the carpet may need to be discarded.

If your damage is less severe, you can try to clean the carpet, but you may face a health risk – and you can't expect miracles.

“Even with your best efforts, wet carpet will be difficult to clean and it will be a challenge to prevent mildew and odor problems,” says Jan Stone, extension textiles and clothing specialist, Iowa State University.

“You also face a health risk,” add Mary Yearn, extension housing specialist. “You can assume that the flood water – and your carpet – has been contaminated with infectious organisms.”

“But if you feel your investment—in time, energy, and cost of cleaning materials and the risk—is worth the effort, here are some things you can do,” Stone says.

Stone and Yearn offer the following tips for cleaning flood-damaged carpet, and recommend wearing rubber gloves when handling sewage-contaminated carpet, if possible.

Get wet carpet off the floor

1. If it's not glued down, roll up the carpet and take it outside to a driveway, patio, or garage floor. Be careful not to puncture your skin with carpet tacks or staples if you must pull up wall-to-wall carpet. Skin wounds put you at greater risk of infectious disease.
2. If the carpet is too heavy to move, lift it off the floor and prop it up on saw-horses, old chairs, or other supports to drain. It may be light enough to move outside after it drains. Don't let your carpet dry this way if you want to save it, or it will be stretched out of shape and won't be flat when dry.
3. Remove the spongy pad underneath. It will hold water and begin to stink. Carpet padding is cheaper to replace than carpet; it probably is not salvageable.
4. Try cleaning a glued-down carpet in place before you attempt to pull it up, because the foam backing probably will be pulled apart (see the clean-it-yourself in place steps later in this list). Use a wet-and-dry vacuum to extract water.
5. After you have taken up the carpet and pad, then clean the floors with detergent solution and bleach before dealing with the carpet, so you can minimize odor and mildew in the house.

Clean the carpet professionally

1. Consult a professional cleaner, describing your damage. They can advise you if your carpet is worth saving. If so, they may be able to come to your home and pick up your carpet at no extra charge.
2. Otherwise, you can take it to them. Professional cleaners charge by the square foot or the hour. Get a cost estimate before you order the service.
3. A steam cleaning (hot-water extraction) method is preferred. Professional cleaners will apply chemicals to help sanitize the carpet. They will return it to you dry, but your home must be ready for it.
4. Leave the carpet at the cleaners while you deal with other flood damage.

Clean-it-yourself outside the house

You can rent a steam cleaning machine and buy the appropriate shampoo to use in cleaning. If a machine is not available, you can take the following steps.

1. Take the carpet outside to lay flat on a dry concrete area, such as a driveway, patio, or garage floor, preferably in full sun. A sloping driveway would be the best choice.
2. Use a garden hose with a strong spray nozzle. Start at one end and “sweep” the carpet with water. Do this once. Turn it over and hose the back side. Then “sweep” the face with water again.
3. Pour on an all-purpose liquid ammonia or pine-based cleaner and let it soak a few minutes. (Do not use full-strength ammonia.) Check ingredient labels on brand name products. Your carpet may change color or fade after contact with these cleaners.
4. “Sweep” the carpet again, forcing the cleaning foam and dirt ahead of you.
5. Rinse thoroughly until all of the cleaning foam has been removed. You **MUST** rinse before any bleaching to remove stains to avoid producing toxic fumes that result when bleach and ammonia are mixed.
6. After the cleaner is rinsed out completely, use a wet-and-dry vacuum to get water out of the carpet
7. Dry the carpet as quickly as possible (see steps below) to help avoid mildew.

Clean-it-yourself in place

Try this method with glued-down carpet **ONLY** if your room has slightly sloped concrete floors and a working drain as many basements do.

1. Use a wet-and-dry vacuum to suck up as much water and mud as possible if you have electricity. Do not let electrical cords get wet.
2. If no power equipment is available, use a garden hose with a strong spray nozzle to flush out mud and water.
3. Start at the end farthest from the drain and follow the steps listed under “Clean-it-yourself outside”. “Sweep” the carpet with water moving in the direction of the drain. (Obviously, you can’t turn over the carpet and hose the backside.)
4. If cleaning is not successful or if the carpet gets mildewed, the only alternative is to tear out the carpeting. If the foam backing gets torn in the process, it may be possible to tear off all the backing to salvage the carpet face following the steps for “Clean-it-yourself outside.” The age of the carpet and the effectiveness of the original glue-job affect the result in this case. Your carpet may tear apart completely and not be salvageable.

Bleaching

Bleaching may further reduce staining of your carpet, but it will not ensure that it is microbe free. Be warned that bleach will probably change the carpet’s color, because carpet dyes are not designed for bleach resistance.

1. Mix a solution of ½ cup liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of water (2-1/2 cups per 5 gallon bucket). You may need more or less than 5 gallons depending on the size of your carpet. Remember, full-strength bleach will dissolve wool fibers and may irritate your skin.
2. While the carpet is still wet, use a small sauce pan or measuring pitcher as a dipper and dribble the bleach solution over one section of the carpet. Wear rubber gloves and use a plastic brush to rub it into the carpet. Let it set for about five minutes, then rinse again with the hose. You don’t want residual bleach left in the carpet, so rinse thoroughly.
3. Repeat the above steps until the total carpet has been treated and rinsed.

Dry the carpet

1. Use a wet-and-dry vacuum to pull water out of the carpet.
2. Place the carpet in full sun. Turn it over occasionally to speed drying. If you have to leave the carpet outside in the rain, it won’t be further damaged as long as it is left flat.
3. If you need to dry the carpet inside, run the central air conditioner and dehumidifiers to help remove moisture. Fans also will help to circulate the air, but they won’t remove moisture.

Prevent mildew

1. Be sure the carpet is thoroughly dry before returning it to the house.
2. Clean floors thoroughly before putting carpet back into place.
3. Dry out the basement as much as possible. Run a dehumidifier and air conditioner to help remove moisture.

4. Close windows on the house if outside air has high humidity. If outside air is drier, open all doors and windows.
5. Run fans to circulate air in tight places, such as closets.

Protect yourself

Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after you've handled carpet or other flood-contaminated materials. Seek medical attention if the flood water comes in contact with open wounds.

"After you've had time to recover from other flood clean-up efforts, it's a good idea to reclean the carpet," Stone says.

"If you have followed these steps, you may have a cleaner carpet that you feel comfortable using again. However, it may have shrunk to be smaller than room size and be a different color than it was before the flood," Yearn says.

Source: Iowa State University Extension Service.