

PROTECTING YOUR HEALTH DURING A FLOOD

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 MDH district office nearest you.

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.
- Wash your child's hands frequently, especially before meals.
- Disinfect toys that may be contaminated, using a solution of two ounces 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 - and 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 doesn't pose any risk unless you take it into your mouth. To keep your risks low:

- Wash your hands thoroughly after working in a contaminated area.
- Wear rubber gloves and boots to protect your hands and feet.
- Take a shower after working in a contaminated area.
- 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 diphtheria or tetanus—during a flood. However, you should always try to keep your immunizations up-to-date, as a matter of routine. A basic series of immunizations against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis is recommended for all

children. Adolescents should get a booster for tetanus and diphtheria (Td) at the age of 11 or 12, and adults should get a Td booster every 10 years, throughout life.

If you get a puncture wound, and you haven't had a Td booster within the last five years, ask your doctor whether you should get a tetanus shot.

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 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.

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 a power failure. Here are a few simple guidelines:

Clean any canned goods you intend to keep. Commercially canned foods can be kept if you wash them with warm water and detergent, then disinfect the outside of the can, using a solution of two ounces bleach in one gallon of water. Remove labels when cleaning the cans.

Discard foods that may be contaminated. That includes:

- Items packaged 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.
- Items with an 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 40 degrees 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—two days if the freezer is full and left unopened.

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.

Source: University of Minnesota Extension Service

