

Health & Safety Tips for Flood Volunteers

Here in Minnesota, people have always taken care of each other in times of trouble. Helping people clean up after a flood is part of that tradition. But clean-up work can be hazardous, so it's important to take care of yourself. This web page offers a few simple guidelines for protecting your health.

Basic Safety Precautions

Protective Equipment

When you must work in a building that's been evacuated or flooded, you may need items like a hard hat, safety glasses, and steel toe or steel shank boots. Use vinyl or latex gloves to handle items that may have been in contact with flood water. Wear rubber boots if pooled water is still present in your work area. To avoid possible allergic reactions, wear a surgical mask or respirator if you suspect a potential mold problem. Use a mask that carries the N-95 designation from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Mold can grow on surfaces inside previously flooded buildings, or on unpreserved food or grain.

Personal Decontamination

After completing your work, scrub down potentially contaminated equipment using clean water and a disinfecting detergent. For example, you should try to clean mud or debris off of your boots before entering buildings or vehicles.

Confined Spaces

Decomposing plant matter or sewage can use up oxygen, and generate hazardous gasses or contaminants like carbon monoxide, hydrogen sulfide, and methane. In a confined, unventilated space, the result can be a potentially fatal breathing hazard. Check with

an expert before working in spaces like silos, well pits, or storm shelters.

Electrical Hazards

Use proper ventilation when running gas or diesel generators, to prevent carbon monoxide build-up or other breathing hazards. Make sure the main building circuits are off, so you won't accidentally feed electricity back into the power supply lines - potentially injuring other workers. Use extreme caution in dealing with downed lines or other electrical equipment - even if the power is currently off.

Heat Stress & Fatigue

As the weather warms up, the exertion of clean-up work can lead to problems like fainting, heat cramps, heat exhaustion or heat stroke. Be aware of the symptoms of heat exhaustion and heat stroke, and take steps to prevent heat stress. Drink a glass of water or some other non-caffeinated beverage every 15-20 minutes while you're on the job, and wear loose, light-colored clothing. Prevent fatigue by maintaining a realistic work schedule, tired people tend to have more accidents.

First Aid for Cuts & Scrapes

Wash cuts or scrapes as soon as possible, using clean water and soap. Cover the injury with bandages or clean gauze, and avoid contact with potentially contaminated items. Seek medical attention if the injury becomes red, hot, or swollen.

Hazardous Materials

Read labels and observe appropriate safety precautions when using potentially hazardous chemical products. Keep these products away from children. Local emergency officials can give you the number of the nearest poison control center.



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Lifting Large Objects

To avoid potential back problems, always be sure to use proper lifting techniques.

- Size up an object before you lift it. If it seems too heavy or awkward to lift, get help or use a mechanical lifting device. If you do try to lift it, make sure you can handle the weight.
- Bend your knees. Lift large objects with your legs, not your back. Center yourself over the load, bend your knees, and get a good hand-hold. Lift straight up, using a smooth motion.
- Make sure you can get where you're going. Before you start out, make sure your capable of carrying the object where it needs to go. Make sure that the path is free of obstacles, spills, or slick spots.
- When you're done - bend your knees again. When you are ready to set your load down, you still need to bear the weight with your legs - not your back. Bend your knees, and lower the object slowly. Don't let go until the object is placed securely on the surface where it is placed.
- Push - don't pull. When you are moving an object on rollers, for example, pushing is easier on your back - and there is less risk of injury if the object tips over.

Immunizations

There is usually no increased risk of getting vaccine-preventable disease - like diphtheria or tetanus - during a flood. You should always try to keep your shots up-to-date, as a matter of routine. However, there is no special urgency about getting caught up right now.

Adults should get a booster shot for diphtheria and tetanus (Td) every 10 years, throughout life. If you get a puncture wound, and you are not sure whether you have had a Td booster in the last five years, check with your doctor to see if you should get a booster shot.

[Learn more about immunizations »](#)

Handwashing

Simple basic hygiene - handwashing - is the single most important thing you can do to protect your health when you clean up after a disaster.

Be sure to wash your hands

- After you touch any surfaces or objects that may have been in contact with debris or other contaminated material.
- Before you eat or drink anything, or touch your hands to your face.

The eight steps of proper handwashing

1. Wet with hot (if available) water
2. Soap up hands and forearms
3. Work up a soapy lather, make sure to get back of hands and between fingers
4. Use a nail brush
5. Rinse hands
6. Use soap and lather up again
7. Rinse
8. Dry hands with paper towels

What if there is no running water?

- Transport and store clean water in clean plastic containers.
- Get a beverage cooler equipped with a spigot, and keep it filled with clean water for handwashing.

What if the water is contaminated?

If the water is suspect, add a tablespoon of bleach to each gallon of water before you wash your hands with it. Do not drink the water either before or after adding bleach!

Safety

Always work with a "buddy!"

Pair off with someone else when doing potentially hazardous work. You can keep track of each other, and make sure you are where you are supposed to be, when you're supposed to be there.

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Flood Water & Health

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, follow these health protection steps.

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