

# Cleaning Up After a Disaster

## 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

**Remember the golden rule of clean-up work  
WASH YOUR HANDS THOROUGHLY  
and do it often!**

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

How do I get my home cleaned up?

If you have moisture in your home:

- Use outside air to dry your home.
- Open windows and doors, use an exhaust fan to remove moist air from the house.
- If available, use a room de-humidifier, empty it often.

If you have water in or on walls and other surfaces:

- Cavities in walls, floors, and ceilings must be opened, cleaned, decontaminated, and thoroughly dried.
- Walls must be allowed to dry from the inside out.
- Remove moisture and debris from all surfaces and get surface materials dry within 24-48 hours.
- Release any water or mud that has been trapped in walls, ceilings, or floor cavities.
- Remove all interior wall finishing materials and insulation.
- Throw out any wet insulation.

Remember!

- Most plaster, wallboard and paneling will have to be thrown away.
- If you think you may have materials containing asbestos in your home, call the Minnesota Department of Health at 651/201-4620.
- Wear a mask to prevent inhaling contaminated dust, especially if you have allergies. Consult with your physician if you have questions.

If clothing is wet or soiled:

- Line dry all articles before attempting to clean or treat them.
- After drying, brush off loose dirt and debris.



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## Cleaning Up After a Disaster – page 2

- Send "Dry Clean Only" items to a professional cleaner.
- Wash clothes several times in cold water only. Add up to a cup of bleach per load of wash if it will not harm the clothing.
- Rinse and dry all items as soon as possible.

If bedding is wet or potentially contaminated:

- Throw out mattresses and pillows.
- Clean blankets in the same way as clothing.

### Salvaging Household Items

If you have wet carpeting

- Pull up waterlogged carpet immediately, to prevent further floor damage.
- Carpet pads cannot be saved. They must be removed and thrown away.
- Attempt to save carpets or throw rugs only if they would be very expensive to replace.
- Clean and dry your floors thoroughly before re-carpeting.

If you have wet floors or hardwood

- Remove any moisture or debris.
- Scrub floors and woodwork within 48 hours, using a stiff brush, water, detergent, and disinfectant.
- Allow all wood to dry thoroughly.

If you have wet furniture

- Discard upholstered furniture if it has been exposed to water or contaminated material.
- Clean, rinse, and disinfect wood furniture.
- Place wood furniture outside in a shady area so it will dry slowly.

If you have wet appliances

- If your hot water heater became wet due to flooding, it should be discarded. The insulation typically can't be replaced and the burner or heating element may be damaged and could cause an explosion or fire if used. If in doubt, consult a service professional before using.
- If the furnace was flooded, have it inspected and serviced by a professional furnace service before using.

### Mold

- If any materials are still wet or moist after 24-48 hours, you should assume they have mold growing on them. See the "Dealing with Mold Problems After a Flood" (<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/emergency/natural/floods/mold/mold.html>)

fact sheet.

### Food Safety

You should generally discard anything in soft packaging or screw-top glass bottles that may have gotten wet, or been in contact with contaminated material. You can sometime save commercially canned goods in metal cans or rigid plastic containers.

To clean canned goods

- Remove the labels.
- Wash in water and detergent.
- Sanitize with a solution of one tablespoon of bleach in a gallon of water.

Discard canned goods if

- The surface is rusted and pitted.
- The can is swollen or leaking.
- The can is badly creased or dented at the rims or seams.

Goods in rigid plastic container can be saved

- If they are not soiled around the cap or closure.
- If they do not have a defective closure.
- If they do not have a dented cap or crown, or an abnormal rim seal.

Discard refrigerated or frozen food

- If it normally requires refrigeration, and it has been above 41° F. for four hours or more.
- If it had been frozen, and it has been thawed for two hours or more.
- If it has deteriorated in quality, for example, if it has an unusual color or odor.

**If in doubt,  
THROW IT OUT!**