

# Cleaning after flooding - health advice

## General advice about cleaning up safely after flooding:

- All flood water should be considered contaminated, i.e. dirty.
- Wash hands with soap and clean water before and after cleaning activities.
- Cover cuts and sores with waterproof plasters.
- Wear waterproof boots and plastic or rubber gloves.
- If possible, use goggles and a face mask while hosing or pressure washing.
- Take care with electrics, gas and sharp objects.
- *Keep children safe.*

## Safety when using household bleach (disinfectant)

- *Keep all cleaning products out of reach of children at all times.*
- Use bleach with care and always follow the manufacturer's instructions.
- Do not mix bleach with other cleaning products or chemicals. This may release dangerous gas.
- Bleach can burn skin and cause permanent eye damage, particularly when it is in concentrated form (straight out of the bottle).
- Avoid touching your eyes when handling bleach. If possible wear goggles. If bleach splashes into your eyes, rinse immediately with lots of cold water (for at least 15 minutes) and consult a doctor.
- Wear rubber household gloves to protect your skin. Take off gloves and wash your hands with soap and water before using the bathroom, eating or smoking.
- To protect your skin against splashes, wear old clothes that cover your arms and legs completely.
- To dilute household bleach, follow the instructions on the bottle - usually 8 capfuls to 5 litres of water.
- To avoid exposure to fumes open the container and prepare the solution outdoors or in a well-ventilated room and make sure the area you are working in is kept well-ventilated.
- It is safer to add bleach into water rather than water to bleach.
- Store household cleaning products in secure overhead cupboards. Use cupboard safety locks.
- Throw away unused bleach solution following cleaning. Empty basins and all buckets when finished and put away out of reach of children.
- Brushes and sponges should be discarded when the cleaning is complete.

## How and what to clean inside your home:

- Shovel out as much mud as possible. Vacuum up dry mud/dust.
- Scrub hard surfaces (including walls, hard floors and food preparation surfaces) with hot soapy water. Use any household detergent, for example, washing-up liquid.
- Then disinfect the surfaces by wiping with bleach solution (follow manufacturer's instructions)
- Always move food out of the way or cover it to prevent chemicals getting into food.
- Do not use bleach on carpets or wooden floors as it can damage furnishings and fabric.
- Wash all delph, pots and pans and cooking utensils.
- Clean and disinfect taps using dilute bleach if they were in contact with flood water and then run the taps for a few minutes.
- Dispose of any food and packaging that had contact with floodwater.\*
- If your electricity has been off for more than 24 hours, the food in your freezer is probably not safe to eat and you should discard it.\*
- Wash bedclothes and other soft fabric articles such as soft toys on a hot cycle (60°C or higher).
- Other contaminated soft furnishings that cannot be put in a washing machine will have to be cleaned professionally.

*\* If items are likely to be the subject of insurance claims, speak to your insurance company first.*

### Drying out your home:

- Ventilate your home well (open all doors and windows). Make sure all air bricks and vents are unblocked.
- Allow cleaned surfaces to dry completely as germs and mould thrive in wet conditions.
- Once your heating has been certified safe to use, it can be turned on to help dry out your home. Keep the temperature around 20-22°C.
- A major risk to health during cleaning up is **carbon monoxide poisoning**. Do not use petrol or diesel generators or other devices using kerosene, propane or natural gas in unventilated spaces.
- If you experience dizziness, headaches or disorientation, the appliance should be switched off. You should move to a well-ventilated area and seek medical advice.

### Cleaning up outside your home

- Hard surfaces such as tarmac and concrete paths can be washed down with a bleach solution.
- Stay off these surfaces for 3 hours after treating with bleach to allow the product to work.
- Bleach can damage wood and metals so use a regular household detergent (washing up liquid) to clean these materials.
- Do not dig or rake lawns or borders as this can spread the bacteria deeper in the soil. Ultraviolet rays from sunlight will destroy bacteria over time.
- Gardens (grass areas) should not be used for recreational purposes for about 2-3 weeks.
- Make sure garden sheds are not accessible to children during drying out time.
- Do not eat any food grown in a garden that has been flooded unless it has been washed **and** cooked.

### Living in your flood damaged home:

- Try to keep some heating on once it has been checked for safety. Consider using a dehumidifier.
- Keep the property well-ventilated. Leave windows open as much as possible but be mindful of security.

### Water Supply:

- If you have a private well that you think has been affected by flooding, or if the colour, taste or smell of the water has changed, assume the water is unsafe to drink unless boiled. Alternatively use bottled water.

### If you feel unwell:

- If you feel unwell during the current environmental emergency, this does not necessarily mean that you are suffering from any illness associated with flooding.
- If you are concerned about yourself or a family member you are advised to contact your family doctor and inform them that you have been experiencing flooding.
- If you develop diarrhoea or vomiting, please attend your family doctor who will inform HSE Department of Public Health.
- The physical stress associated with keeping floodwater at bay and the mental stress caused by the threat of damage or relocation, may make you feel unwell.
- If you're feeling overwhelmed, contact friends, relations or your family doctor. Your family doctor will refer you to a psychologist if necessary.

### Further information:

- Visit [www.hse.ie/publichealth](http://www.hse.ie/publichealth) and go to the flooding section.

