

Flooded Homes

Environmental Hazards May Await Those Returning to Flooded Homes

State environmental health experts are cautioning residents affected by the floodwaters from Hurricane Matthew to exercise extreme caution if reentering their homes. Cautions range from electrical hazards to those brought on by wildlife such as snakes, and by mold, sewage, and contaminated food.

Before reentering a flood-damaged home, there are a number of personal safety issues of which to be aware. Be sure that your tetanus protection is up-to-date. If not, get a tetanus booster. Downed power lines and other electrical hazards may exist. NEVER handle a downed power line. Instead, contact the local utility company immediately. In addition, check for structural damage and do not enter if support columns are damaged or other structural components appear to be compromised.

If you are able to enter your home, wear personal protective equipment such as rubber boots, gloves, eye protection, and N95 respirators and follow these suggested actions.

When You First Reenter Your Home

- If you have standing water in your home and can turn off the main power from a dry location, go ahead and turn off the power, even if it delays cleaning. If you must enter standing water to access the main power switch, then call an electrician to turn it off. NEVER turn power on or off yourself or use an electric tool or appliance while standing in water.
- Have an electrician check the house's electrical system before turning the power on again.
- If the house has been closed up for several days, enter briefly to open doors and windows to let the house air out for at least 30 minutes before you stay for any length of time.
- If your home has been flooded and has been closed up for several days, presume your home has been contaminated with mold.
- If your home has been flooded, it also may be contaminated with sewage.
- Watch for animals, especially snakes. Flooding may have forced them from their homes and they may seek shelter in yours.

Dry Out Your House

If flood or storm water has entered your home, dry it out as soon as possible. Follow these steps:

- If you have electricity and an electrician has determined that it's safe to turn it on, use a "wet-dry" shop vacuum (or the vacuum function of a carpet steam cleaner), an electric-powered water transfer pump, or sump pump to remove standing water. If you are operating equipment in wet areas, be sure to wear rubber boots.
- If you do not have electricity, or it is not safe to turn it on, you can use a portable generator to power equipment to remove standing water. It is recommended to contact the local utility prior to connecting generators to avoid hazards to line workers who are trying to restore permanent power. **Note: If you must use a gasoline-powered pump, generator, pressure washer, or any other gasoline-powered tools to clean your home, never operate the gasoline engine inside a home, basement, garage, carport, porch, or other enclosed or partially enclosed structures, even if the windows and doors are open. Such improper use can create dangerously high levels of carbon monoxide and cause carbon monoxide poisoning.**

- If weather permits, open windows and doors of the house to aid in the drying-out process.
- Use fans and dehumidifiers to remove excess moisture. Fans should be placed at a window or door to blow the air outwards rather than inwards, so not to spread the mold.
- Have your home heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning (HVAC) system checked and cleaned by a maintenance or service professional who is experienced in mold clean-up **before you turn it on**. If the HVAC system was flooded with water, turning on the mold-contaminated HVAC will spread mold throughout the house. Professional cleaning will kill the mold and prevent later mold growth. When the service determines that your system is clean and if it is safe to do so, you can turn it on and use it to help remove excess moisture from your home.
- Prevent water outdoors from reentering your home. For example, rain water from gutters or the roof should drain away from the house; the ground around the house should slope away from the house to keep basements and crawl spaces dry.
- Ensure that crawl spaces in basements have proper drainage to limit water seepage. Ventilate to allow the area to dry out.
- Remove and discard items that cannot be cleaned and disinfected, including mattresses, carpets, rugs, cosmetics, stuffed animals, baby toys, pillows, and paper products.
- Remove and discard drywall and insulation contaminated with sewage and floodwaters
- Consider all floodwaters to be contaminated. Any food that has been in contact with floodwater should be disposed.
- If power is out for more than four hours, it is recommended to dispose of foods requiring refrigeration. **IF IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT.**
- If your home is served by a septic system, do not allow vehicular traffic over system components as recovery efforts proceed since damage may occur during debris removal.
- If septic system components, such as tanks and trenches, are exposed or damaged, notify your local health department and limit access of the area to pets and children. In addition, don't let children play in floodwater.
- If you have a private well, once floodwaters recede, run the floodwater out of the well (**NOT** through the house plumbing) until it clears. Then disinfect the well and the house plumbing according to guidance available from the local health department. Once disinfection is complete, have the well sampled by the local health department to confirm that it is safe to drink.
- Please use good personal hygiene for you and your family by frequently washing hands with warm, soapy, potable water, especially before eating.