DELAWARE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES
Division of Public Health

Public Information

FLOOD CLEAN UP: DEALING WITH WATER DAMAGE

When to clean up

Cleaning up after a flood should begin as soon as it is safe to return to the building. Prompt and proper cleanup is important for your health. Floodwaters can contain microorganisms (such as bacteria, molds, and viruses), raw sewage, dead animals, and other debris. It is important to remove such debris and/or contaminated materials from your home quickly. If materials are not cleaned properly or discarded promptly, poor air quality can result. Microorganisms can contaminate indoor air and cause respiratory problems and allergies. They can continue to damage building materials long after the floodwaters recede.

How homeowners can avoid problems

Remove water.

Pump, sweep, or drain water from the building. Remove tree branches, garbage, mud, and other debris. Remove furniture, carpets, and other household items that were wet or damaged by the floodwaters. Wet and contaminated materials contain microorganisms that contaminate indoor air. Patch or fix leaky roofs, broken windows, and other places to prevent leaks. It may be necessary to hire professionals to complete these and the following steps.

Completely dry out your house/building.

The drying process is extremely important because most microorganisms survive in moist environments. Thoroughly dry the building during the first 24 to 48 hours after the water enters the structure. Use fans if it is safe to use electricity. Open windows to increase air circulation, ventilation, and drying. Use dehumidifiers with windows and doors closed.

It may be necessary to remove portions of walls, ceilings, and floors to completely dry out the house. Wallboard, fiberglass, insulation, and wall-to-wall carpeting that were soaked only with clean rainwater may be able to be saved, if they are dried properly and completely. Consider removing and replacing those materials to avoid future indoor air quality problems, especially if the drying process did not begin within 48 hours.

Continue the drying process for days or weeks until materials are thoroughly dry (not just to the touch), and humidity levels return to normal (35% to 55%). Humidity levels are important to monitor since microorganisms thrive in humid environments. There should not be a musty odor if the house is dried completely and properly.

Clean all surfaces.
Thoroughly wash and disinfect the walls, floors, studs, closets, shelves, contents, and every flooded part of your house. Use bleach, mildew removers, and non-sudsing household cleaners and disinfectants such as quaternary, phenolic, or pine oil-based cleaners.

Read the label on every cleaner and use the appropriate safety instructions, such as wearing gloves and eye protection, providing proper ventilation, and not mixing different household cleaning agents. Mixing certain products, such as bleach and ammonia, can produce toxic fumes and result in injury and even death. Exercise care when cleaning items since household cleaning agents can be harsh.

Remove and discard items that cannot be dried and cleaned effectively.
It can be difficult to throw away water-damaged household items, especially if they hold sentimental value. However, keeping certain items that were soaked with water could be harmful to your health, as they are a source of microbial growth. Generally, discard wet materials that cannot be thoroughly cleaned and dried.

Replace fiberboard, fibrous insulation, and disposable filters in your heating and air conditioning system if they contacted water. The heating and air conditioning ducts will also need to be cleaned if they contacted water.

Prevent Carbon monoxide poisoning.
Carbon monoxide (CO) is an odorless, colorless gas that can be lethal at high levels. Dangerous carbon monoxide levels can build up rapidly if combustion devices are used indoors. Gasoline-powered generators, camp stoves, grills, lanterns, and charcoal-burning devices are designed for outdoor use only. Do not use these indoors.