



Cleaning up inside after a flood

Introduction

Red Cross has a long history in helping people before, during and after an emergency. The Red Cross Emergency REDiPlan Project aims to provide people with quality advisory information to help them recover from an emergency.

This information sheet is one of a range of products provided in good faith to assist people recover from floods. If you **do not feel confident** in undertaking these tasks you should always seek the advice of professional services.

Before undertaking these tasks you should always contact your insurer.

Where to start

The walls, floors, closets, shelves, contents—every flooded part of your house—should be thoroughly washed and disinfected. Some projects, such as washing clothes, may have to wait until all the utilities are restored. Others may be best done by professionals. This information sheet offers suggestions on the best way to clean flooded items.

Make sure you have good protective equipment, strong boots, long pants and long sleeves, eye protection and gloves.

Clean up supplies

Put together a clean up kit. These contain many useful items such as a broom, mop, bucket, and cleaning supplies. In most cases, household cleaning products will do the job if you use them correctly.

Check the label on the products to see how much to use. Some products shouldn't be used on certain materials; the label will tell you that. Apply cleaner and give it time to work before you mop or sponge it up. Follow directions and all safety precautions on the container.

After cleaning a room or item, go over it again with a disinfectant to kill the germs and smell left by the floodwaters. You may also need to get rid of mildew, an unwelcome companion to moisture that shows as fuzzy splotches.

Cleaners

1st choice: Non-sudsing household cleaners

2nd choice: Laundry soap or detergent





Disinfectants

1st choice: Commercial disinfectants or sanitizers, such as the quaternary, phenolic, or pine oil based ones. (Check labels for the contents).

2nd choice: 1/4 cup of laundry bleach for 4 litres of water.

Mildew Removers

1st choice: Commercial mildew removers or mildewicides

2nd choice: Washing soda or tri-sodium phosphate (available at grocery or paint stores). Use 5 tablespoons per 4litres of water.

3rd choice: 1/4 cup of laundry bleach for 4litres of water. See below on using bleach.

Bleach

Liquid chlorine bleach can do a variety of flood clean up jobs.

Make sure that 5.25% sodium hypochlorite is the only active ingredient. Bleach that has a scent added to improve its smell is available. Don't use drybleach or any bleach that does not contain chlorine. **Be careful of fumes and wear rubber gloves. Read the safety instructions on the label.**

Do not mix bleach with other household chemical products, especially ammonia or toilet bowl cleaner; the chemical reaction can create a poisonous gas. Do not use bleach on aluminum or linoleum.

Cleaning tips

Tackle **one room** at a time. A two bucket approach is most efficient: use one bucket for rinse water and the other for the cleaner. Rinse out your sponge, mop, or cleaning cloth in the rinse bucket. Wring it as dry as possible and keep it rolled up tight as you put it in the cleaner bucket. Let it unroll to absorb the cleaner. Using two buckets keeps most of the dirty rinse water out of your cleaning solution. Replace the rinse water frequently.

Walls

Start cleaning a wall at the bottom or where the worst damage was. If you did not have to remove the wallboard or plaster, you may find it the wallboard or plaster won't come clean and you will want to replace it rather than clean it. If you have removed the wallboard or plaster, wash the studs and sills and disinfect them.





Windows

If you taped your windows before the storm, clean the tape off as soon as possible. The sun will bake the adhesive into the glass. If glass cleaners don't remove the adhesive, try tar remover, acetone, nail polish remover, or a razor blade. And next time, don't bother taping the windows. You don't get much protection for all that effort.

Furniture

Don't try to force open swollen wooden doors and drawers. Take off the back of the piece of furniture to let the air circulate. You will probably be able to open the drawers after they dry.

Solid wood furniture can usually be repaired and cleaned, but wood veneer often separates and warps. Wood alcohol or turpentine applied with a cotton ball may remove white mildew spots on wood. Cream wood restorers with lanolin will help restore good wooden furniture parts.

Upholstered furniture soaks up contaminants from floodwaters and should be cleaned only by a professional. This is also true of **carpets** and **bedding**. Unless the piece is an antique or especially valuable, upholstered furniture soaked by floodwaters should probably be thrown out. Get a cost estimate from a professional to see if furniture is worth saving.

Appliances

There's an unexpected danger of **shock** with some **electrical appliances** such as TV sets and radios. Certain internal parts store electricity even when the appliance is unplugged. Check the back for a warning label. Appliances with such labels will need professional cleaning. But first, get a cost estimate to see if they are worth saving. **You should always consult a licenced electrician before plugging in appliances**

You'll need appliances such as the washing machine, dryer, dishwasher, and vacuum cleaner to help clean your home and contents. The motors or heating elements can usually be cleaned. If you can't wait for a professional cleaning job, unplug, disassemble, and hose off the appliances thoroughly (with hot water, if possible). Then clean and disinfect them, but do not use detergents.

Clean and disinfect **dishwashers, washing machines, and dryers** only with water that has been **declared safe for drinking**. Make sure the sewer line is working before starting a dishwasher or washing machine. You can speed up the drying process for motors and parts by using a blow dryer using a moisture displacement spray. Moisture displacement sprays,





such as electronics parts cleaners or WD-40 lubricating and penetrating oil, are available at hardware or automotive parts stores. The sprays can also stop rust and corrosion until the appliance can be disassembled and cleaned. One word of caution: the spray is flammable. Read and follow label instructions and precautions.

Moving parts such as motors and pulleys will need oil or grease. Contacts and electrical switches can be cleaned with a moisture displacement spray or an aerosol contact cleaner available at electronics or auto parts stores. Allow a motor to run for 30 minutes with no load before you use it. For example, run the vacuum cleaner without connecting the belt. *Watch for stripped or damaged wire insulation.*

Refrigerators and freezers are more complicated. They may have foam insulation and sealed components that suffered little water damage. But those appliances hold food, so they should be cleaned, disinfected, and checked by a professional, or replaced. If your repair person says an expensive appliance should be replaced, get the opinion in writing and discuss it with your insurance adjuster before you spend money for another one.

*Be sure all appliances are properly grounded. This is most important if there was damage to the wiring from the flood or during cleaning. Appliances that must be grounded have a round third prong on their plugs. If at all uncertain, **consult a licenced electrician.***

Kitchen items

Throw out soft plastic and porous items that probably absorbed whatever the floodwaters carried in. Floodwaters are contaminated, so you may want to wash dishes by hand in a disinfectant. Air dry the disinfected dishes; do not use a dish towel.

Like the washing machine, the dishwasher should also be used only after you know your water is safe to drink and your sewer line works. Clean and disinfect it first. Then use a hot setting to wash your pots, pans, dishes, and utensils. (If you have an energy saving setting, do not use it.)

Food

Throw any food out that has been touched by floodwaters. Even food in tin cans should be discarded if the cans got wet during the flood because there is no way to be absolutely certain the food inside is safe. Do not keep food in bottles or jars with bottle caps or screw on lids—they do not keep out floodwaters.

Talk to you local government health officer for further advice on food.



A final reminder

Remember, recovery is a long and sometimes tiring process. So you should make sure that you look after yourself. For further advice on looking after yourself, see our booklet ***Coping with a major personal crisis***

Further Information

www.redcross.org.au