

Flooding Safety Tips

“As the Commonwealth prepares for the second storm of the week, with its strong winds and driving rains, the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency has issued a number of safety tips to assist residents regarding the potential of flooding throughout the region, be it inland or along the coast,” stated MEMA Director Don Boyce. “Flooding continues to be the most common and costly type of emergency Massachusetts faces, annually.”

- **CONTINUALLY MONITOR THE MEDIA** – Be aware of the storm’s impact on your community.
- **MONITOR STREAM AND URBAN STREET FLOODING** – For those living in areas that are prone to localized flooding, closely watch small streams and low-lying areas for early flooding. Make sure street catch basins are cleared.
- **BE AWARE OF THE TIMES OF HIGH TIDES** – With astronomically high tides, coastal regions can be impacted.
- **ENSURE YOUR HOME IS READY** – Minimize damage from basement flooding by elevating utilities, and materials that could be damaged by limited basement flooding.
- **HEED EVACUATION REQUESTS** – Listen to local Public Safety officials. Follow recommended evacuation routes, shortcuts may be blocked or dangerous.
- **DO NOT WALK THROUGH FLOWING WATER** – Drowning is the number one cause of flood deaths. Most of these drownings occur during flash floods. Flash flood waters move at very fast speeds and can roll boulders, sweep away cars, tear out trees, destroy buildings, and obliterate bridges. Six inches of swiftly moving water can knock you off of your feet. If you must walk through a flooded area, use a pole or stick to ensure that the ground is still there and solid, even where the water is not flowing.
- **DO NOT DRIVE THROUGH A FLOODED AREA** – More people drown in their cars than anywhere else. Cars can be swept away in just 2 feet of moving water. Do not drive around road barriers. They are there for a reason. The road or bridge may be washed out or structurally unsound. If your car becomes trapped in floodwaters, abandon it immediately and climb to higher ground. Many deaths have resulted from attempts to move stalled vehicles.
- **AVOID POWER LINES AND ELECTRICAL WIRES** – Electrocution is also a major killer in floods. Electrical current can travel through water. Report downed

power lines to your utility company or local emergency manager. Always assumed a downed wire is a live wire.

- **LOOK BEFORE YOU STEP** – After a flood, the ground and floors are covered with debris, including broken bottles and nails. Floors and stairs that have been covered with mud can be very slippery.
- **BE ALERT FOR GAS LEAKS** – Do not turn on electric lights, but use a flashlight to inspect for damage. A spark from the light switch could cause an explosion or fire. Do not smoke or use candles, lanterns or open flames unless you are sure that the gas has been turned off and the area has been aired out.
- **CARBON MONOXIDE EXHAUST KILLS** – Only use camping stoves, generators or other gasoline-powered machines outdoors. Fumes from charcoal are especially deadly, so never use indoors.
- **CLEAN EVERYTHING THAT GETS WET** – Floodwaters have probably picked up sewage and chemicals from roads, farms and factories. Spoiled food and flooded medicines and cosmetics are health hazards. When in doubt, throw them away.
- **BE PREPARED FOR A ROUGH TIME** – Recovering from a flood is a big job. It is rough on the body and the spirit. The aftereffects of this type of disaster on you and your family may last a long time. Consult a health professional on how to recognize and care for anxiety, stress and fatigue.

MEMA officials also remind residents who have experienced flood damage to take photographs as soon as possible. Those who have a flood insurance policy should contact the insurance company or agent who wrote the policy as soon as possible in order to file a claim. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administers the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) through the Federal Insurance Administration (FIA). The NFIP makes flood insurance available in communities that adopt and enforce ordinances to reduce flood damage.

Caution Recommended Upon Return to Flood Damaged Home

Residents take extra precautions as they return to their flood-damaged homes, apartments or businesses. MEMA cautions that all danger has not passed simply because the water has receded and the structure appears safe.

Hazards include contaminated floodwater, exposed electrical wires and weakened structures.

Before Entering the Building:

- Check the outside for downed wires or gas leak. If detected, notify your utility.
- Look for external damage, particularly cracks in the foundation. If you find obvious damage, have a building inspector check the integrity of the structure before you go in.
- Enter the building carefully. If the door sticks at the top as it opens, the ceiling could be sagging and ready to collapse.

Once Inside the Building:

- Look before you step as floors and stairs may be covered with debris and may be very slippery.
- Be alert for gas leaks. Do not strike a match or use an open flame unless you know the gas has been turned off and the area has been ventilated. Use a flashlight to inspect damage.
- Safely turn off all utilities. Even if the utility company has turned off electrical power to the area, you should immediately shut off the electrical system at the circuit breaker. Have all utility connections inspected before resuming use.
- Document damage with photographs or video.
- Do not run appliances or motors that have gotten wet until they are cleaned and dried.
- Pump out basements gradually, about 1/3 per day to avoid structural damage.
- Anticipate mold. Within days of being waterlogged, drywall, furniture and carpets may develop mold or mildew if not dried and cleaned immediately.
- Dress for safety, wearing a disposable dust mask inside the house to filter mold spores, asbestos, or other contaminants. Wear safety glasses, protective gloves and footwear.

- Hose down the house, as many health hazards are found in the mud and silt that floodwaters leave behind. Shovel as much mud as possible out of the house, then hose it down, inside and out.
- Be aware of health hazards, as floodwaters pick up sewage and chemicals from roads, farms, factories and storage buildings. Clean and disinfect all items both inside and outside that were exposed to floodwaters.
- When in doubt, throw it out; however do not turn your yard into a dump. Have debris hauled away before it causes additional health concerns.

Tips for After the Flood

“Flood dangers do not end when the waters begins to recede,” stated Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency Director Don Boyce. “To that end, MEMA shares this information to help ensure the continued safety of you, your family, your property and your community.”

- If you have been evacuated, listen to the Media and your local Public Safety officials. Do not return home until authorities indicate that it is safe to do so.
- Avoid floodwaters. The water may be contaminated by oil, gasoline or raw sewage.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and clean water if you come in contact with floodwaters.
- Never attempt to drive into or through floodwaters. Your vehicle can be quickly swept away by as little as 2 feet of moving water. Many flood fatalities are vehicle related.
- Be aware of areas where floodwaters have receded. Roads may have weakened and could collapse under the weight of your car.
- Do not become a spectator. Unnecessary travel into the most impacted areas could hinder efforts of Public Safety officials.
- Avoid all downed power lines. Electrical current can travel through water. Assume all wires are live. Report downed electrical wires to your utility company or local authorities.
- Before returning to a building, inspect for cracks or other damage. When entering, use extreme caution; making sure that the building is not in danger of collapsing.
- Take pictures of the damage, both to the house and its contents for insurance claims.
- Look for hazards such as broken or leaking gas lines, flooded electrical circuits, submerged furnaces or electrical appliances and damaged sewage systems. Report them to the utility company or local authorities.
- Until local authorities proclaim your water supply safe, boil water for drinking and food preparation vigorously for five minutes before using.

- Flooded buildings should be pumped out and disinfected. Pump out basements gradually, about 1/3 per day, to avoid structural damage.
- After the water is pumped out, solid wastes should be disposed of in a functioning sewage disposal system or sealed in plastic bags for disposal in an approved landfill.
- All flooded floor and wall surfaces should be washed with a solution of two capfuls of household bleach for each gallon of water.
- Carpeting, mattresses and upholstered furniture should be disposed of or cleaned and disinfected by a professional cleaner.
- Dampness in basements, walls, carpets, and wood provide an excellent environment for mold to flourish. If you see or smell mold, take immediate steps to eliminate the excess moisture.
- Throw away food that has come in contact with floodwaters.
- Do not turn your yard into a dump. Have debris hauled away before it causes additional health hazards.
- Yards that have been contaminated by flooded sewage systems should be disinfected by a liberal application of lime. Children and animals should be kept away from limed areas until the lime is no longer visible.
- If your home, apartment or business has suffered damage, call your insurance company or agent who handles your flood insurance right away to file a claim. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administers the National Flood Insurance Plan (NFIP) through the Federal Insurance Administration (FIA). The NFIP makes flood insurance available in communities that adopt and enforce ordinances to reduce flood damage.
- Be a good neighbor. Make sure those around you are safe and have the help that they need.
- Be prepared for a rough time. Recovering from a flood is a big job. It is taxing on the body and spirit. The after-effects of this type of disaster on you and your family may last a long time. Consult a health professional on how to recognize and care for anxiety, stress and fatigue.

These tips, which have been issued by the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), include information developed by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Dealing with Mold

If a home has water damage from the flooding, mold could develop in as short of a time as 24 to 48 hours of water exposure and may continue to grow until steps are taken to thoroughly dry out the premises and eliminate the source of moisture. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that mold can be recognized by wall and ceiling discoloration, and a musty, earthy odor.

Although mold is a naturally existing substance, it can be harmful to humans. When airborne mold spores are present in large quantities, they can cause **allergic reactions, asthma episodes, infections, and other respiratory problems**. Continued exposure to mold may result in nasal or sinus congestion, eye, nose, or throat irritations, and adverse effects to the nervous system.

Individuals who are at the greatest risk are infants and children, the elderly, those with immune-compromised related diseases, pregnant women, and those with existing respiratory conditions. Anyone falling into these categories should consult a physician if they are experiencing health problems.

Follow these six steps to dry your home and combat health problems associated with mold:

- If the humidity outside is lower than indoors, open up the house, and if the weather permits, open all the doors and windows to exchange the moist indoor air for drier outdoor air. If you have a thermometer with a humidity gauge, you can monitor the indoor and outdoor humidity. On the other hand, when temperatures drop at night, an open home is warmer and will draw moisture indoors. At night and other times when the humidity is higher outdoors, close up the house.
- Remove all wet furniture, contents and carpets or rugs. If you decide to keep them, they must be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.
- Open closet and cabinet doors to remove drawers to allow air circulation. Drawers may stick because of swelling. Do not try to force them. Speed up the drying process by opening the back of the cabinet to let the air circulate. You will probably be able to remove the drawers as the cabinet dries out.
- Using fans can help move the air and dry out the home. They will blow out dirty air that might contain contaminants from sediment in the ductwork. Be sure to clean or hose out any ducts. Do not use central air conditioning or the furnace blower if the ducts were under water.

- Running dehumidifiers and window air conditioners will reduce the moisture, especially in closed up areas.
- Use desiccants (materials that absorb moisture) such as silica gel, which are very useful in drying closets or other enclosed areas where air cannot move through. These types of materials may be purchased at hardware stores or home and garden stores.

If mold becomes an issue in your household, here are some of the ways to clean it out:

- **Most household cleaners will be good enough to cleanse walls and wood furniture. An alternative is a mixture of ¼ cup of liquid chlorine bleach for every gallon of water.**
- Be aware that wallpaper paste can harbor mold, and therefore wall coverings may have to be removed and replaced.
- After cleaning a room or item, go over it again with a disinfectant to kill the germs and odors left by the floodwaters.
- Be careful of fumes; wear rubber gloves and a dust mask. Read any safety instructions in order to properly handle cleaning materials.

Drying your home could take several weeks. While it may seem that your house is safe from mold, your health may still be at risk because of the lingering effects of mold. When water damage infiltrates a structure, the long lasting effects can be detrimental to the composition of the building. If you believe that your health has been affected by exposure to mold, you should contact your physician and have your house checked.