

Natural Disasters and Severe Weather

Reentering Your Flooded Home



When returning to a home that's been flooded after natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods, be aware that your house may be contaminated with mold or sewage, which can cause health risks for your family.

When you first reenter your home:

Try to return to your home during the daytime so that you do not have to use any lights. Use battery-powered flashlights and lanterns, rather than candles, gas lanterns, or torches.

- If you have standing water in your home and can turn off the main power from a dry location, then 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 you smell gas or suspect a leak, turn off the main gas valve, open all windows, and your house immediately. Notify the gas company or the police or fire departments or State Fire Marshal's office, and do not turn on the lights or do anything that could cause a spark. Do not return until you are told it is safe to do so.
- If the house has been closed up for several days, enter briefly to open doors and windows to let the house air out for a while (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, assume your home has mold.
- If your home has been flooded, it also may be contaminated with sewage. See [Floodwater After a Disaster or Emergency](#).

Throw away unsafe food.

Throw away food that may have come in contact with flood or storm water; perishable foods that have not been refrigerated properly due to power outages; and those with an unusual odor, color, or texture. Unsafe food can make you sick even if it looks, smells, and tastes normal. When in doubt, throw it out. For more information, visit [Keep Food and Water Safe After a Disaster or Emergency](#).

Use safe water.

Floodwater can contaminate your drinking water. Some contaminants from surface water get into the groundwater and affect private drinking water wells and municipal water systems that use groundwater.

- Follow local guidance on whether your water is safe to drink.
- If you have a private well and live in an area with flooding, get your water tested before you use it.
- Do not use water you suspect or have been told is contaminated to wash dishes, brush your teeth, wash and prepare food, wash your hands, make ice, or make baby formula. Safe water for drinking, cooking, and personal hygiene includes bottled, boiled, or treated water.
- Your state, local, or tribal health department can make specific recommendations for boiling or treating water in your area. For more information, visit [Keep Food and Water Safe After a Disaster or Emergency](#).

Use generators and other electrical equipment safely.

- Talk to your utility company about using electrical equipment, including power generators. Be aware that it is against the law and a violation of electrical codes to connect generators to your home's electrical circuits without the approved, automatic-interrupt devices. If a generator is on line when electrical service is restored, it can become a major fire hazard. In addition, the improper connection of a generator to your home's electrical circuits may endanger line workers helping to restore power in your area.
- All electrical equipment and appliances must be completely dry before returning them to service. Have a certified electrician check these items if there is any question. For more information, see [Protect Yourself and Others From Electrical Hazards After a Disaster](#).
- Never use a generator, pressure washer, or any gasoline-powered engine inside your home, basement, or garage or less than 20 feet from any window, door, or vent. Visit [Preventing Carbon Monoxide Poisoning After an Emergency](#) for more information.

Dry out your home to prevent mold.

If flood or storm water has entered your home, dry it out as soon as possible to prevent mold. 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. **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, or less than 20 feet from any door, window, or vent, 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 cleanup **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, rainwater 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.

For more information on mold cleanup, visit Homeowner's and Renter's Guide to Mold Cleanup After Disasters.

Clean up your home safely.

Take steps to protect yourself and your loved ones during your cleanup after a flood. Follow our cleanup tips and monitor your radio or television for up-to-date emergency information. For more information, visit [Clean Up Safely After a Disaster](#).

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Content source: National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH), Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC)