



## Avoiding Illness after a Natural Disaster

**After a natural disaster, the risk of getting an infectious disease is greater. Food and water for consumption – may be contaminated. See the separate information sheet on Food and Water Safety.**

Be aware of the other potential sources of infection.

### Animals

Natural disasters can increase the number of stray animals around. Animal bites can cause infections. Animals such as rats can also spread disease.

**Stay away from wild or stray animals.**

Avoid attracting rats and other animals:

- Store all food in sealed containers
- Wash dishes, pans, and cooking utensils immediately after use
- Dispose of food in sealed containers
- Dispose of other garbage and debris as soon as possible.
- Dispose of dead animals. When doing this:
  - Wear protective clothing, including gloves, boots, and eyewear and a mask if possible.
  - Cover any open wounds.
  - Wash hands thoroughly before placing fingers in mouth (nail biting, etc.).

### Snakes

- Be aware of snakes that may be swimming in the water to get to higher ground and those that may be hiding under debris or other objects.
- If you see a snake, back away from it slowly and do not touch it.
- If you or someone you know are bitten, try to see and remember the color and shape of the snake, which can help with treatment of the snake bite.

### Mosquitoes

Rain and flooding may lead to an increase in numbers of mosquitoes, which can carry diseases. To prevent mosquito bites:

- Use screens on dwellings.
- Wear long pants, socks, and long-sleeved shirts.
- Use insect repellents that contain DEET or Picaridin.
- Stay away from stagnant pools of water.
- Drain all standing water left outdoors in open containers, such as flower pots, tires, pet dishes, or buckets.



### Water

During and after a disaster, water can become contaminated with microorganisms, such as bacteria, sewage, agricultural or industrial waste, chemicals, and other substances that can cause illness or death. Water may not be safe to drink, clean with, or bathe in.

#### To minimise your risk of illness:

Use treated water for drinking and cleaning

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- Refer to the document “Earthquake Instructions to Make Water Safer” for instructions on how to treat water to make it safe for use. Use only bottled, boiled, or treated water for:
  - Drinking
  - Cleaning
  - Making ice
  - Cooking or preparing food
  - Brushing your teeth
  - Bathing
  - Washing dishes
  - Washing your hands

If you use bottled water, be sure it came from a safe source. If you do not know that the water came from a safe source, you should boil or treat it before you use it.

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#### Practice basic hygiene

- Wash your hands with soap and bottled water or warm water that has been boiled or disinfected.
- Wash your hands before preparing food or eating, after toilet use, after participating in clean-up activities, and after handling articles contaminated with floodwater or sewage.
- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer to wash your hands if you have a limited supply of clean water.

### Avoiding flood water

Flood water should be avoided, and not used to clean, bathe, play, drink, or cook with. Flood water may contain sewage, and may be contaminated with chemicals and other pollutants. Especially avoid flood water if you have any wounds or illness. Although intact skin which comes into contact with flood water does not, by itself, pose a serious health risk, there is some risk of disease from eating or drinking anything contaminated with flood water. If you have any open cuts or sores, keep them clean and covered. If a wound develops redness, swelling, or drainage, seek immediate medical attention.

Do not allow children to play in flood water areas, wash children's hands frequently (always before meals), and do not allow children to play with flood-water contaminated toys that have not been disinfected. You can disinfect toys using a solution of one cup of bleach in 5 gallons of water.

### Cleaning up flood water

Protect yourself and your family by following these steps:

#### Inside the Home



- Keep children and pets out of the affected area until cleanup has been completed.
- Wear rubber boots, rubber gloves, and goggles during cleanup of affected area.
- Remove and discard items that cannot be washed and disinfected (such as, mattresses, carpeting, carpet padding, rugs, upholstered furniture, cosmetics, stuffed animals, baby toys, pillows, foam-rubber items, books, wall coverings, and most paper products).
- Remove and discard drywall and insulation that has been contaminated with sewage or flood waters.
- Thoroughly clean all hard surfaces (such as flooring, concrete, molding, wood and metal furniture, countertops, appliances, sinks, and other plumbing fixtures) with hot water and laundry or dish detergent.
- Help the drying process by using fans, air conditioning units, and dehumidifiers.
- After completing the cleanup, wash your hands with soap and warm water. Use water that has been boiled for 1 minute (allow the water to cool before washing your hands).
  - Or you may use water that has been disinfected for personal hygiene use (solution of  $\frac{1}{8}$  teaspoon of household bleach per 1 gallon of water). Let it stand for 30 minutes. If the water is cloudy, use a solution of  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon of household bleach per 1 gallon of water.
- Wash all clothes worn during the cleanup in hot water and detergent. These clothes should be washed separately from uncontaminated clothes and linens.
- Wash clothes contaminated with flood or sewage water in hot water and detergent. It is recommended that a laundromat be used for washing large quantities of clothes and linens until your onsite waste-water system has been professionally inspected and serviced.
- Seek immediate medical attention if you become injured or ill.

### Outside the Home

- Keep children and pets out of the affected area until cleanup has been completed.
- Wear rubber boots, rubber gloves, and goggles during cleanup of affected area.
- Have your onsite waste-water system professionally inspected and serviced if you suspect damage.
- Wash all clothes worn during the cleanup in hot water and detergent. These clothes should be washed separately from uncontaminated clothes and linens.
- After completing the cleanup, wash your hands with soap and warm water. Use water that has been boiled for 1 minute (allow the water to cool before washing your hands).
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### Blood and bodily fluids

Exposure to blood or bodily fluids can transmit diseases, such as AIDS and Hepatitis B. To reduce your risk of infection:

- Avoid touching other people's blood and bodily fluids. If you must touch them, wear gloves.
- Wear gloves to dispose of objects that have been contaminated with blood or bodily fluids.

### References

International SOS - Country Guides - <http://www.internationalsos.com>

Disclaimer: This information has been developed for educational purposes only. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Should you have questions or concerns about any topic described here, please consult your healthcare professional.

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