

Keeping safe and well when cleaning your home after flooding



Flooding can cause a range of health problems. There may be direct effects such as physical injury, or an increased risk of developing skin or gut infections through contact with contaminated food water. Longer-term effects can include mental health and wellbeing issues and chest problems due to exposure to mould and damp.



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Safely cleaning your home

A key part of the recovery phase following a flood includes cleaning and drying your home or property to check for any health harms as a result of the flood. Floodwater can contain harmful pollutants or contaminants hazardous to humans and animals. When cleaning up a home affected by floodwater, you must use rubber boots, protective overalls or waterproof apron, and waterproof gloves to avoid exposure to floodwater.

If the clean-up causes a lot of water to splash from scrubbing, hosing or pressure-washing, wear a safety face mask and eye protection such as goggles.

Thoroughly wash your hands with warm water and soap after each cleaning session and contact with flood water. If you have any open cuts or sores, clean and use waterproof plasters.

The National Flood Forum provides information on local flood groups, while further information on flood recovery is available from Government websites.

It can take time to recover after a flood and it's normal to experience tiredness, difficulty sleeping, and anxiety during these circumstances. Take regular breaks and seek help from others where possible.

If you are experiencing water disruption, please use bottled water to wash your hands.

Do not turn on gas or electricals if they may have become wet. Only turn them on once they have been checked by a qualified technician.

How and what to wash

To reduce the risk of catching an infectious disease from flood water you should:

Wash clothes used during cleaning on a separate wash cycle from your other clothes.

Be careful with clean-up as injuries can occur from electrocution or sharp items hidden by flood waters.

Use hot water and detergent to clean all hard surfaces across your home that may have come into contact with floodwater – this includes walls and flooring.

Clean and disinfect your kitchen including all countertops, all crockery (for example plates, cups, bowls) and cooking items (such as chopping boards, pans, knives and other accessories) before using them with food. If you have a dishwasher, and it has been cleared by a qualified technician, you can use it to clean and sanitise your kitchen items. It is advised to discard any wooden boards and utensils if contaminated by floodwater.

Textile items such as clothing, bedding and toys should be washed on a 60°C cycle with detergent. If you suspect issues with your drainage system, it is recommended that a launderette be used for washing large quantities of clothes and linens until your waste-water system has been checked.

If there are any dead animals such as rodents and pests, if possible, double bag these in plastic and dispose them while wearing rubber gloves into your normal waste bin.



How to dry your items

Heating, dehumidifiers and good ventilation can help to dry out your home.

It's very important to make sure heaters, dryers or fires are well-ventilated to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning, so if you're drying an indoor space, make it's well ventilated.

Do not use petrol or diesel generators or other similar fuel-driven equipment indoors because their exhaust gases contain carbon monoxide, which can poison if in high concentrations in the air.

If you have gas or oil central heating, make sure to get it checked by a qualified engineer before turning it on. Keep the thermostat between 20°C and 22°C for steady drying.

If you have air bricks to any underfloor spaces, ensure these are unblocked to boost cross ventilation to these areas. Make sure to look for any loose material or dust while your floorboards and walls continue to dry out, vacuuming these areas on a regular basis.

When you can, remove dirty water and silt from the property. If you have wooden floors, check the space under the ground floor as the dirty water in this space may need to be pumped out.

As your home continues to dry out, the mould should disappear. If it persists, please contact a specialist cleaner.

Any items that have been discarded during the cleaning and drying process should be placed in rubbish bags and put in hard bins.

Insurance support

Check your insurance – there are a number of organisations that can help you to find out more about flood defence technology such as the National Flood Forum, through their Blue Pages guide and the Property Care Association.

Check Flood Re, a joint initiative between the government and insurers that helps to make flood cover in household insurance more affordable. www.floodre.co.uk

Mental health impacts

Experiencing a flood can be frightening and can disrupt your daily life activities. It's normal to experience tiredness, difficulty sleeping, and anxiety in these circumstances even if your home was not flooded. It's important not to underestimate the stress and strain of being flooded, having to move from your home, or cleaning up after a flood. Take the time to consider your and your loved ones' mental health and wellbeing.

Disruptions that occur after a flood can also be a source of stress, such as:

- disruption to your GP clinic and accessing necessary healthcare services
- disruption to regular household activities
- interruption to school facilities
- damage to home and personal belongings

Experiencing any one of these factors can be distressing and it's normal to feel anxiety, even for a while after the event. If you're feeling this way, please get in touch with a local community support group, or neighbours to help you cope and recover.



Looking after yourself in the short term

Take time for yourself and to consider your mental health and wellbeing; go to a place where you feel calm and safe. Make sure you rest, relax, get sufficient sleep and eat healthily and regularly. Don't force yourself to go over the events or pressure others to talk about events or their concerns.

There will be lots of practical work that needs to be done but making time to talk to someone you trust can be helpful. Your friends and family are there to support you and taking time to talk to and support each other to get better is important.

Exercise can help you feel better: attempt something manageable such as walking. If you exercise regularly, it's important to try and keep to your regular routine, if possible.

Start clean-up efforts within your home when you feel ready. It can help to start repair efforts as soon as you're ready to remove flood water and reduce lasting damage where possible but don't overdo it. Cleaning up is part of your recovery process and should be treated as such.

Help with practical difficulties can be of great importance to maintaining your wellbeing, so keep in touch with your local authority who will be able to support you in resolving issues.

Connecting with your local community is an important source of practical and psychological support. You may be able to access support groups, local recovery hubs and community centres in your area.

Looking after others in the short term

If you are helping someone who has been affected by flooding, there are informal ways to offer support if professional support is not needed or available. Providing practical care and support as well as emotional support, for example listening to and comforting people, is commonly referred to as psychosocial support, and psychological first aid (PFA) is a well-recognised approach to facilitate this type of support.

Before attempting to deliver PFA, it's important to complete training to develop relevant knowledge and skills.

There is an online course in PFA as well as a specialised course to deliver PFA to children:

www.futurelearn.com/courses/psychological-first-aid

Looking after yourself and others in the long term

If you have concerns about your own or others' mental health, or your distress continues over an extended period of time, visit your GP or call NHS 111, who can help to identify further sources of support.

NHS Better Health also has advice on how to deal with stress or anxiety as well as information about where you can access further support, **www.nhs.uk/better-health**. NHS mental health services are available online and locally.

A small proportion of people may require access to specialist mental healthcare. This can be accessed through GPs or by self-referring to a local NHS Talking Therapies service.

Helplines, such as Samaritans, can provide support to anyone in emotional distress or struggling to cope. Their free helpline is available 24 hours a day on 116123.



How you can help others

Experiencing a flood can be distressing and some people can be at a higher risk of developing further mental health problems. In these cases, it's important to seek support from loved ones such as family, friends and neighbours to lessen the negative impacts of flooding on mental health.

Getting in touch and staying together with families, friends or community groups can help reduce suffering and promote recovery. Local authorities and voluntary groups may also be able to help with flood preparedness, signposting you to your local flood warden.

If you are helping someone affected by flooding, here are some simple techniques you can use to offer support.

- assess the situation and ensure that their circumstances are safe, and help them make contact with recovery agencies such as the local authority/ flood warden
- check there are no immediate physical health needs such as ambulance or a hospital visits
- check with them about their needs or concerns, and identify if any basic needs are not met, such as access to food, water, shelter and medication
- help people contact their loved ones and others who can provide familiar sources of support
- listen, provide information if you have it, and help people plan their next steps

Before offering help, it may be useful to identify access to support, or checking the local flood warnings in case there is a continued flood risk.

More information about how to support people who have been affected by flooding or other emergencies is available from the World Health Organization (WHO).

There are other organisations that provide more information on keeping safe during a flood as well as wellbeing advice, including Age UK and the Red Cross.

Local health services

Anyone with concerns for their health should contact their GP for advice or call NHS 111.

If you want to check that your scheduled appointment is unaffected (for example GP, outpatient or inpatient services at a local hospital), use the usual local telephone numbers for your health services. There is local health service information on the NHS website.



Further information & useful telephone numbers

West Berkshire Council: **01635 551111**

National Flood Forum: **01299 403 055**

Property Care Association: **01480 400000**

Flood Re: Email: **support@floodre.co.uk** or call **0330 912 7700**

NHS Talking Therapies: **0300 365 2000**

NHS Better Health: **www.nhs.uk/better-health**

Age UK Berkshire: **0118 959 4242**

Red Cross: **01635 40081**

Environment Agency Floodline: **0345 988 1188** (24-hour service)

Met Office: **0370 900 0100**

Thames Water Emergencies: 24-hour customer service team:
0800 316 9800

The West Berkshire Directory is an online one-stop shop for help and support at: **<https://directory.westberks.gov.uk/kb5/westberkshire/directory/home.page>**

Up to date alerts and general flooding advice are provided on the GOV.UK website.

This information has been adapted from the Government's Flooding Health Guidance and Advice webpages. leaflet at:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/flooding-and-health-public-advice/flooding-and-health-advice-for-the-public

