

Floods: returning home safely

Community information

When returning to your home after a flood, read this information to protect yourself and your family from possible injury, illness or disease.

Hazards and floodwaters

Do not swim or allow children to swim or play in floodwater.

Health and safety issues include:

- the risk of drowning, or injury from sharp objects and other physical hazards
- the risk of electrical shock from downed power lines
- illness if floodwaters contain faecal material (poo) from overflowing sewerage systems and agricultural waste, or chemicals from industrial wastes.
- skin infections from contact of open wounds with contaminated floodwaters
- tetanus from tetanus bacteria in soil, dust or manure entering through a break in the skin
- mosquitoes growing in water and some types can transmit mosquito-borne disease.

Keep children and pets away from your property until clean-up is completed.

Hazards when entering your property

- Gas or electricity supplies on your property may be damaged – these hazards need to be confirmed safe by a qualified electrician or plumber.
- The structural integrity of your home and structures may be affected – this needs to be declared safe by a qualified building surveyor.
- If gas has collected inside buildings, do not smoke or use matches, lighters or other open flames. If possible, use flashlights or other battery-operated lights instead of candles.

- Mosquitoes can breed rapidly and become a nuisance. Mosquitoes also transmit mosquito-borne diseases – cover your skin with light coloured clothing with long sleeves and pants. Use insect repellent containing DEET or picaridin on all exposed skin.
- Be careful of wild animals including rodents, snakes or spiders which may be trapped in and around your home. Cuts from broken glass and debris are also a problem. Always wear sturdy waterproof boots and rubber or leather gloves.
- Pets and other animals may have died and need to be removed. For advice on safe disposal speak to your local council or vet.
- Buildings may have asbestos-containing material. Take all necessary precautions when handling asbestos-containing debris. Extensive demolition, repair and renovation work involving asbestos-containing materials should be carried out by licensed asbestos workers.
- Flooding can cause mould growth, which must be cleaned up before moving back into your home.
- Flooding may cause sewage to overflow inside your home. Contaminated areas must be cleaned and disinfected.
- Drinking water may be contaminated – do not drink any water unless you know it is safe.
- Food may be contaminated by floodwater or spoiled due to a power failure.

Preventing illness

Infectious diseases including gastrointestinal infections and hepatitis A can spread from contact with floodwater contaminated surfaces.

Personal hygiene is essential.

Never use unsafe, contaminated water to wash dishes, brush your teeth, wash your hands, wash and prepare food, make ice or to prepare baby formula. Local water agencies will tell you if tap water is unsafe to use. Refer to the next section for more information.

Wash hands regularly with soap and safe water, and especially after clean-up activities or handling articles contaminated with floodwater or sewage.

Alcohol hand sanitisers are an alternative if soap is unavailable – though only use on non-soiled hands.

Wash children's hands frequently and always before meals.

Disinfect flood-affected toys before allowing children to play with them.

If you have any open cut or sore that has been exposed to floodwater:

- keep it as clean as possible by washing with soap and covering it with a sticking plaster.
- contact a doctor for further treatment advice (including if a tetanus shot is needed).
- if redness, swelling or discharge occurs get immediate medical attention.

Preventing illness from contaminated water

Do not drink floodwater or tank water that may be contaminated by floodwater.

Most Victorians are on a reticulated (mains) water supply. In most cases, mains water will remain safe. If this is not the case, you will be formally notified.

Local water agencies will tell you if tap water is unsafe to drink, use for cooking, cleaning or bathing, and when tap water is safe to use again.

Safe, alternative water supplies will be put in place in the event a mains water supply is affected by flood waters. If the water is not safe, use bottled or boiled water.

Correctly boil water by:

- Bringing water to a rolling boil (automatic cut-off point on a kettle or, if using a saucepan, bubbles remain when stirred) and cool before drinking.
- If you suspect the water is contaminated with chemicals, boiling will not make it safe to drink – only use bottled water.

Children and elderly people are particularly at risk from dehydration. Ensure they drink plenty of safe (bottled) water until the drinking water supply is declared safe.

For infants, use bottled water to make up powdered formula and use pre-prepared baby food.

An above ground rainwater tank that has not been inundated with floodwaters or damaged should be safe for continued use. If you believe your rainwater tank has been contaminated, please contact the Department of Health and Human Services Water Unit on 1300 761 874 or email water@dhhs.vic.gov.au

Clean children's toys that have come in to contact with floodwater by:

- soaking them in a solution of 1.5 cups of household bleach in 10 litres of cold water (a household bucket) for two minutes.
- Rinse in clean water.
- Air dry toys after cleaning.

Managing sewage overflow inside your home

Floodwater may contain sewage and therefore harmful bacteria and viruses.

Keep children and pets away from sewage-affected areas until it has been cleaned up.

To clean-up:

- Use rubber gloves and boots, and eye protection.
- Throw away contaminated household materials that cannot be cleaned or disinfected, such as carpet and children's soft toys.
- Clean and disinfect all contaminated areas with hot water and detergent, then disinfect.
- Do not use high-pressure water jets on asbestos-containing materials.
- Clean cooking utensils and work surfaces using the bleach solution described above.
- Leave hard surfaces wet for 10 minutes before rinsing with clean water.
- Disinfect cleaning mops, brooms and brushes with the bleach solution.
- Clean and dry dirty footwear and wash your clothes separately after clean-up.
- Wash your hands and any affected parts of your body with soap and water.

Food safety

After a flood, throw away:

- Food that has come into direct contact with floodwater.
- Any food that has an unusual odour, colour or texture.
- Perishable foods (including meat, poultry, fish, eggs or leftovers) that have been left above 5 °C for more than four hours.
- Canned food if the can is open, bulging or damaged.
- Food in containers with screwcaps, snap-lids, crimped caps (soft drink bottles), twist caps, flip-top lids and home canned foods.

To clean cans that are sealed, not bulging and intact which have come into contact with floodwater:

- Remove the labels.
- Wash the cans.
- Dip them in the bleach solution for two minutes.
- Relabel the cans with a waterproof marker pen.

If the **power is on**, refreeze or cook food that has thawed but contains ice crystals and is below 4 °C.

If the **power is off**, store food safely by keeping the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible.

Add block or dry ice to your fridge if the power is likely to be off longer than four hours. Wear gloves when handling ice.

Remove mosquitoes breeding sites to prevent illness from mosquito-borne disease

After a flood:

- Mosquitoes breed in still or stagnant water.
- Tip water out of pots, plant-saucers, play equipment, and other containers in the yard.
- Remove any debris in the yard that collects water, such as old tyres, cans, tarpaulins or palm fronds. Remove pools of standing water by clearing debris or digging small channels to assist drainage.
- Check for damaged fly screens on windows, doors and vents. Repair or install new screens if required. Install mosquito-zappers or use coils to deter mosquitoes around the home.

Further information

- If you or anyone in your family feels unwell, seek medical advice from your local doctor or call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on 1300 60 60 24 for health information and advice.
- For further advice contact the Environment Section, Health Protection at the Department of Health on 1300 650 172.
- For information and safety precautions relating to asbestos go to: www.asbestos.vic.gov.au

Information on returning home safely after floods go to the [Better Health Channel](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)
<www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>

To receive this document in another format, phone the Environment Section Health Protection on 1300 761 874, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email the [Environment Section](mailto:environmental.healthunit@dhs.vic.gov.au) at <environmental.healthunit@dhs.vic.gov.au>.

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