

# OSHA FACT Sheet

Natural Disaster Recovery

## Cleanup Hazards

Cleanup work of any kind is hazardous, but flood conditions make it even more so. Following the procedures listed below will help to keep you safe and healthy while cleaning up after natural disasters that involve flooding.

### Health Tips

- Take frequent rest breaks when lifting heavy, water-laden objects. Avoid overexertion and practice good lifting techniques. To help prevent injury, use teams of two or more to move bulky objects; avoid lifting any materials that weigh more than 50 pounds per person, and use proper automated lifting assistance devices if practical.
- When working in hot environments, have plenty of drinking water available, use sunscreen, and take frequent rest breaks. Wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothing.
- Be sure a first-aid kit is available to disinfect any cuts or abrasions. Protect open cuts and abrasions with waterproof gloves or dressings.
- Wash your hands often during the day, especially before eating, drinking, or applying cosmetics.

### General Precautions

- Use a wooden stick or pole to check flooded areas for pits, holes, and protruding objects before entering.
- Ensure that all ladders and scaffolds are properly secured prior to use.
- Conduct a preliminary worksite inspection to verify stability before entering a flooded or formerly flooded building or before operating vehicles over roadways or surfaces. Don't work in or around any flood-damaged building until it has been examined and certified as safe for work by a registered professional engineer or architect.
- Washouts, trenches, excavations, and gullies must be supported or their stability verified

prior to worker entry. All trenches should be supported (e.g., with a trench box); if no support is available, the trench must be sloped at no less than a 1:1 (45°) angle for cohesive soil and 1:1½ (34°) angle for granular soils including gravel, sand, and loamy sand or submerged soil or soil from which water is freely seeping.

- Establish a plan for contacting medical personnel in the event of an emergency.
- Report any obvious hazards (downed power lines, frayed electric wires, gas leaks or snakes) to appropriate authorities.
- Use fuel-powered generators outdoors. Do not bring them indoors.
- Use life-vests when engaged in activities that could result in deep water exposure.
- Use extreme caution when handling containers holding unknown substances or known toxic substances (for example floating containers of household or industrial chemicals). Contact the Environmental Protection Agency for information on disposal at the National Response Center (1-800-424-8802).
- Do NOT use improvised surfaces (e.g., refrigerator racks) for cooking food or for boiling water to avoid exposure to heavy metals.

### Clothing and Personal Protective Equipment

- Always wear water tight boots with steel toe and insole, gloves, long pants, and safety glasses during cleanup operations; sneakers should NOT be worn because they will not prevent punctures, bites or crush injuries. Wear a hardhat if there is any danger of falling debris.
- Wear a NIOSH-approved dust respirator if working with moldy building materials or vegetable matter (hay, stored grain, or compost).

- When handling bleach or other chemicals, follow the directions on the package; wear eye, hand, and face protection as appropriate; and have plenty of clean water available for eye wash and other first-aid treatments.

## Electrical Hazards

- Do NOT touch downed power lines or any object or water that is in contact with such lines.
- Treat all power lines as energized until you are certain that the lines have been de-energized.
- Beware of overhead and underground lines when clearing debris. Extreme caution is necessary when moving ladders and other equipment near overhead power lines to avoid inadvertent contact.
- If damage to an electrical system is suspected (for example, if the wiring has been under water, you can smell burning insulation, wires are visibly frayed, or you see sparks), turn off the electrical system in the building and follow lockout/tagout procedures before beginning work. Do not turn the power back on until electrical equipment has been inspected by a qualified electrician.
- When using a generator, be sure that the main circuit breaker is OFF and locked out prior to starting the generator. This will prevent

inadvertent energization of power lines from backfeed electrical energy from generators and help protect utility line workers from possible electrocution.

- Be aware that de-energized power lines may become energized by a secondary power source such as a portable backup generator.
- Any electrical equipment, including extension cords, used in wet environments must be marked, as appropriate, for use in wet locations and must be undamaged. Be sure that all connections are out of water.
- All cord-connected, electrically operated tools and equipment must be grounded or be double insulated.
- Ground-fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs) must be used in all wet locations. Portable GFCIs can be purchased at hardware stores.

## Fire Protection

- Immediately evacuate any building that has a gas leak until the leak is controlled and the area ventilated.
- Be sure an adequate number of fire extinguishers are available and re-evaluate the fire evacuation plan.
- Be sure all fire exits are clear of debris and sand bags.

This is one in a series of informational fact sheets highlighting OSHA programs, policies, or standards. It does not impose any new compliance requirements. For a comprehensive list of compliance requirements of OSHA standards or regulations, refer to *Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations*. This information will be made available to sensory-impaired individuals upon request. The voice phone is (202) 693-1999. See also OSHA's website at [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov).



**Occupational Safety  
and Health Administration**

U.S. Department of Labor

2003



# OSHA FACT Sheet

## Flood Cleanup

Flooding can cause the disruption of water purification and sewage disposal systems, overflowing of toxic waste sites, and dislodgement of chemicals previously stored above ground. Although most floods do not cause serious outbreaks of infectious disease or chemical poisonings, they can cause sickness in workers and others who come in contact with contaminated floodwater. In addition, flooded areas may contain electrical or fire hazards connected with downed power lines.

### Floodwater

Floodwater often contains infectious organisms, including intestinal bacteria such as *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, and *Shigella*; Hepatitis A Virus; and agents of typhoid, paratyphoid and tetanus. The signs and symptoms experienced by the victims of waterborne microorganisms are similar, even though they are caused by different pathogens. These symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramps, muscle aches, and fever. Most cases of sickness associated with flood conditions are brought about by ingesting contaminated food or water. Tetanus, however, can be acquired from contaminated soil or water entering broken areas of the skin, such as cuts, abrasions, or puncture wounds. Tetanus is an infectious disease that affects the nervous system and causes severe muscle spasms, known as lockjaw. The symptoms may appear weeks after exposure and may begin as a headache, but later develop into difficulty swallowing or opening the jaw.

Floodwaters also may be contaminated by agricultural or industrial chemicals or by hazardous agents present at flooded hazardous waste sites. Flood cleanup crew members who must work near flooded industrial sites also may be exposed to chemically contaminated floodwater. Although different chemicals cause different health effects, the signs and symptoms most frequently associated with chemical poisoning are headaches, skin rashes, dizziness, nausea, excitability, weakness, and fatigue.

Pools of standing or stagnant water become breeding grounds for mosquitoes, increasing the risk of encephalitis, West Nile Virus or other mosquito-borne diseases. The presence of wild animals in populated areas increases the risk of diseases caused by animal bites (e.g., rabies) as well as diseases carried by fleas and ticks.

### Protect Yourself

After a major flood, it is often difficult to maintain good hygiene during cleanup operations. To avoid waterborne disease, it is important to wash your hands with soap and clean, running water, especially before work breaks, meal breaks, and at the end of the work shift. Workers should assume that any water in flooded or surrounding areas is not safe unless the local or state authorities have specifically declared it to be safe. If no safe water supply is available for washing, use bottled water, water that has been boiled for at least 10 minutes or chemically disinfected water. (To disinfect water, use 5 drops of liquid household bleach to each gallon of water and let sit for at least 30 minutes for disinfection to be completed.). Water storage containers should be rinsed periodically with a household bleach solution.

If water is suspected of being contaminated with hazardous chemicals, cleanup workers may need to wear special chemical protective outer clothing and goggles. Before entering a contaminated area that has been flooded, you should don plastic or rubber gloves, boots, and other protective clothing needed to avoid contact with floodwater.

Decrease the risk of mosquito and other insect bites by wearing long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and by using insect repellants. Wash your hands with soap and water that has been boiled or disinfected before preparing or eating foods, after using the bathroom, after participating in flood cleanup activities, and after handling articles contaminated by flood waters. In addition, children should not be allowed to play

in flood waters or with toys that have been in contact with flood waters. Toys should be disinfected.

## What to do if Symptoms Develop

If a cleanup worker experiences any of the signs or symptoms listed above, appropriate first-aid treatment and medical advice should be sought. If the skin is broken, particularly with a puncture wound or a wound in contact with potentially contaminated material, a tetanus vaccination may be needed if it has been five years or more since the individual's last tetanus shot.

## Tips to Remember

- Before working in flooded areas, be sure your tetanus shot is current (given within the last 10 years). Wounds that are associated with a flood should be evaluated for risk; a physician may recommend a tetanus immunization.
- Consider all water unsafe until local authorities announce that the public water supply is safe.
- Do not use contaminated water to wash and prepare food, brush your teeth, wash dishes, or make ice.
- Keep an adequate supply of safe water available for washing and potable water for drinking.
- Be alert for chemically contaminated floodwater at industrial sites.
- Use extreme caution with potential chemical and electric hazards, which have great potential for fires and explosions. Floods have the strength to move and/or bury hazardous waste and chemical containers far from their normal storage places, creating a risk for those who come into contact with them. Any chemical hazards, such as a propane tank, should be handled by the fire department or police.
- If the safety of a food or beverage is questionable, throw it out.
- Seek immediate medical care for all animal bites.

This is one in a series of informational fact sheets highlighting OSHA programs, policies, or standards. It does not impose any new compliance requirements. For a comprehensive list of compliance requirements of OSHA standards or regulations, refer to *Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations*. This information will be made available to sensory-impaired individuals upon request. The voice phone is (202) 693-1999. See also OSHA's website at [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov).



# OSHA FACT Sheet

Natural Disaster Recovery

## Fungi

Flood conditions contribute to the growth and transmission of many kinds of fungi, some of which can cause sickness. Cleanup workers are at increased risk of exposure to airborne fungi and their spores because they often handle moldy building materials, decaying vegetable matter, rotting waste material, and other fungus-contaminated debris. The fungal material is carried into the respiratory tract when airborne dust particles are inhaled.

There are many different kinds of fungi, including mildew, molds, rusts, and yeasts. Most of these are harmless, but some can cause respiratory and other disorders when workers inhale or come into contact with fungi. Inhalation is the route of exposure of most concern to flood cleanup workers. The recommendations below offer strategies for workers renovating flooded buildings, homes, and structures to protect themselves while handling building materials that are visibly contaminated with fungi.

For workers cleaning up flooded buildings, homes, and other structures, excessive moisture or water accumulation indoors will encourage the growth of the fungi that are already present. Some fungi have the potential to cause adverse health effects such as allergic responses and asthma attacks. Individual who are sensitive to molds may have signs and symptoms of allergic reactions such as nasal stuffiness, eye irritation, and wheezing. These individuals should minimize fungal exposure by wearing respirators, gloves, and eye protection. They should also seek to eliminate fungi, as described below.

In addition, repeated or prolonged contact of the skin with flood water and continuous sweating can lead to fungal skin infections. These can be minimized or avoided by washing the skin with warm, soapy water and keeping it as dry as possible.

### What to do if Symptoms Develop

If a cleanup worker experiences severe allergic or skin symptoms, or severe flu-like symptoms, he or she should seek medical

advice. A health care provider can determine whether medication or any other precautions are necessary.

### Tips to Remember

For all workers that may be exposed to mold and fungi:

- Avoid breathing dust (fungal spores) generated by wet building materials, crops, and other materials.
- Consider using an N-95 NIOSH-approved disposable respirator as a minimum when working with moldy or damp hay, grain, compost, or building materials.
- Consider discarding all water damaged materials. Articles that are visibly contaminated with mold should be discarded. **When in doubt, throw it out.**
- Surfaces that have a light covering of mold should be scrubbed with warm, soapy water and rinsed with a disinfectant made of ½ cup liquid household bleach mixed in one gallon of water.
- CAUTION: Do not mix bleach with other cleaning products that contain ammonia.
- After working with mold-contaminated materials, wash thoroughly, including the hair, scalp, and nails.
- If the safety of food or beverage is questionable, throw it out. Only drink safe drinking water that has been bottled, boiled, or treated until there is confirmation that the community water supply is safe for consumption.

For workers that are cleaning up or renovating buildings and homes that have been flooded, consider the following recommendations:

- If flooding has caused severe damage to a building or home and there is the chance of extensive mold growth, consult with your insurance carrier or local health department to identify a professional with expertise in Mold Remediation.

# Fungi

- If you suspect that flooding has damaged building integrity, consult a structural engineer or other professional with appropriate expertise.
- NIOSH-approved respirators are strongly recommended. Respiratory protection such as the N-95 must be used in accordance with OSHA's Respiratory Protection Standard (29 CFR 1910.134). Also wear gloves and eye protection.
- Remove building materials and furnishings that are wet and may become contaminated with mold growth and place them in sealed impermeable bags or closed containers. Large items with heavy mold growth should be covered with polyethylene sheeting and sealed with duct tape before being removed from the area. These materials can usually be discarded as ordinary construction waste.
- Remove and discard porous organic materials that have become wet or are visibly contaminated (e.g., damp insulation in ventilation system, moldy ceiling tiles, and mildewed carpets). Again, these materials can usually be discarded as ordinary construction waste.
- Clean and disinfect nonporous surfaces where microbial growth has occurred with detergents, chlorine-generating slimicides, or other

biocides and ensure that these cleaners have been removed before air handling units are turned on. When you use a biocide or disinfectant, use appropriate personal protective equipment. NIOSH-approved respirators with the appropriate chemical cartridges are recommended. Wear gloves and eye protection also.

For cleanup workers in rural and agricultural communities:

- Silos and other enclosed areas should be vented prior to entry. However, this may not eliminate the problem entirely. If a worker is transporting or working with moldy animal feed, exposures are likely to be threatening if the feed and the worker are enclosed in a barn, silo or other structure. Workers will still need to wear respirators.
- Workers uncapping a silo, shoveling grain, or working with feed, especially in any enclosed space, should always wear at a minimum a NIOSH-approved N-95 particulate respirator. Grain and hay should be stored when fully dry.

For additional information concerning fungi, health effects, and addressing flood damaged materials, please see OSHA's Safety and Health Topics webpage on Molds and Fungi at: <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/molds/index.html>

This is one in a series of informational fact sheets highlighting OSHA programs, policies, or standards. It does not impose any new compliance requirements. For a comprehensive list of compliance requirements of OSHA standards or regulations, refer to *Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations*. This information will be made available to sensory-impaired individuals upon request. The voice phone is (202) 693-1999. See also OSHA's website at [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov).



**Occupational Safety  
and Health Administration**

U.S. Department of Labor

2003