

If your home is damaged by flooding it can be a very traumatic experience. Depending on the level of damage caused there can be a lot of things you need to consider before you can return and start living as normal in your property.

Check Your Home First

If there is standing water next to the outside walls of your home, don't go in. You won't be able to tell if the building is safe or structurally sound. Before you go in, walk carefully around the outside of your home and check for loose power lines and gas leaks. You will know if there is leaking gas by the putrid, distinct odour that is added to gas to let people know that gas is leaking. If you find downed lines or leaks call the electricity/gas board.

Check the foundations for cracks or other damage. Examine porch roofs and overhangs to be sure they still have all their supports. Look for gaps between the steps and the home. If you see obvious damage, have an Inspector check the home before you go in. Some Counties require official inspections for all buildings after a flood. If any supports or portions of the foundation wall are missing or the ground is washed away, the floor is not safe. If you have any doubts about safety, contact a contractor before going in.

Go Inside Carefully

If the door sticks and has to be forced open, it is probably swollen. If it only sticks at the bottom, it can be forced open. If it sticks at the top, your ceiling may be ready to fall. You can force the door open but wait outside the doorway for a minute, where you will be protected if something falls.

If the door won't open easily it may be easier for you to enter your home through a window. Look carefully at the ceiling before you go in to be sure it is not ready to fall.

Do not smoke or use candles, gas lanterns or other open flames in your home. Air out your home completely, there may be explosive gas.

Step Carefully. Water and mud make the floor very slippery. Also watch for loose flooring, holes and nails. Check for cabinets and other tall pieces of furniture that might be ready to fall over. Remove mirrors and heavy pictures from walls. They will not stay up if the plasterboard is wet.

Take Care of Yourself

You and your family have been through a disaster, your life has been turned upside down and it will take time for things to return to normal.

With all the clean-up and repair jobs awaiting you, it may seem odd to consider emotional issues, but a disaster can do damage beyond the obvious destruction and debris you see everywhere. You should recognise that the flood could take its toll on you as well as your property.

Watch for signs of stress

You have just been through a disaster and the recovery period can be long, hard and chaotic. Don't be surprised if you experience tension or see signs of stress in family members. Often other people will notice problems more readily than you do.

Stay Healthy

Infants, pregnant women and people with health problems should avoid the flooded area until clean up is complete. Small children tend to put things in their mouths;

pregnant women need to be cautious to avoid injury and exposure to disease. People with health problems are more likely to get sick or be injured.

Your body is used to being clean, when you work in an area that has been flooded you will be exposed to dangerous chemicals and germs that you are not used to and can make you very sick.

Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly and often. This is especially important before handling food, eating or smoking. If possible use an anti-bacterial soap on your hands, avoid biting your nails.

Confirm that the water is clean and safe. Don't drink it or wash dishes until you are sure.

Don't hurt yourself. Items are much heavier when wet. Don't try to move large objects by yourself, unfortunately injuries, especially back injuries, are a common side effect of cleaning up after a flood.

Be safe around poisons. Many of the products you will use to clean, disinfect and repair your home are poisonous. Read and follow the recommended manufacturer's instructions. Keep all medical products out of the reach of children.

Clean Up

The walls, floors, shelves, contents - every flooded part of your house - should be thoroughly washed and disinfected. Some projects, such as washing clothes, may have to wait until all the utilities are restored. Others may be best done by professionals.

In most cases, household cleaning products will do the job if you use them correctly. Check the label on the products to see how much to use. Some products shouldn't be used on certain materials; the label will advise you of this. Apply cleaner and give it time to work before you mop or sponge it up. Follow directions and all safety precautions on the container.

After cleaning a room or item, go over it again with a disinfectant to kill the germs and smell left by the floodwaters. You may also need to get rid of mildew, an unwelcome companion to moisture that shows as fuzzy splotches.

Cleaning Tips

Tackle one room at a time. A two bucket approach is most efficient: use one bucket for rinse water and the other for the cleaner. Rinse out your sponge, mop or cleaning cloth in the rinse bucket. Wring it as dry as possible and keep it rolled up tight as you put it in the cleaner bucket. Let it unroll, to absorb the cleaner. Using two buckets keeps most of the dirty rinse water out of your cleaning solution. Replace the rinse water frequently.

Walls

Start cleaning a wall at the bottom or where the worst damage was. If you did not have to remove the plasterboard or plaster, you may find that the plasterboard or plaster won't come clean and you will want to replace it rather than clean it. If you have removed the plasterboard or plaster, wash the studs and sill and disinfect them.

Furniture

Don't try to force open swollen wooden doors and drawers. Take off the back of the piece of furniture to let the air circulate. You will probably be able to open the drawers after they dry.

Solid wood furniture can usually be repaired and cleaned, but wood veneer often separates and warps. Wood alcohol or turpentine applied with a cotton ball may remove white mildew spots on wood. Cream wood restorers with lanolin will help restore good wooden furniture parts.

Upholstered furniture soaks up contaminants from floodwaters and should be cleaned only by a professional. Unless the piece is an antique or especially valuable, upholstered furniture soaked by floodwaters should be thrown out. Get a cost estimate from a professional to see if furniture is worth saving.

Appliances

There is an unexpected danger of shock with some electrical appliances such as TV sets and radios. Certain internal parts store electricity even when the appliance is unplugged. Check the back for a warning label. Appliances with such labels will need professional cleaning. But first, get a cost estimate to see if they are worth saving.

Clean and disinfect dishwashers, washing machines and dryers only with water that has been declared safe for drinking. Make sure the sewer line is working before starting a dishwasher or washing machine.

Watch for stripped or damaged wire insulation. Be sure all appliances are properly earthed. This is most important if there was damage to the wiring from the flood or during cleaning.

Clothing and Linens

Even if your washing machine did not get wet, do not use it until you know that the water is safe enough to drink and that your sewer line works. (Perhaps a friend or relative has a washing machine you can use until yours is clean and working.)

Before you wash clothes in the washing machine, run the machine through one full cycle. Be sure to use hot water and a disinfectant or sanitizer.

Take clothes and linens outdoors and shake out dried mud or dirt before you wash them. Hose off muddy items to remove all dirt before you put them in the washer. That way your drain won't clog.

If the item is 'Dry Clean Only' shake out loose dirt and take the item to a professional cleaner. Furs and leather items are usually worth the cost of professional cleaning. If you want to clean leather yourself, wash the mud off and dry the leather slowly away from heat or sunlight.

Kitchen Items

Throw out soft plastic and porous items that probably absorbed whatever the floodwaters carried in. Floodwaters are contaminated, so you may want to wash dishes by hand in a disinfectant. Air dry the disinfected dishes; do not use a dish towel.

Like the washing machines, the dishwasher should also be used only after you know your water is safe to drink and your sewer line works. Clean and disinfect it first.

Then use a hot setting to wash your pots, pans, dishes and utensils. (If you have energy saving setting do not use it.)

Those appliances that hold food should be cleaned, disinfected and checked by a professional, or replaced. If your repair person says an expensive appliance should be replaced, get the opinion in writing and discuss it with your insurance adjuster before you spend money on another one.

Throw out any food that has been touched by floodwaters. Even food in tin cans should be discarded if the can has got wet during the flood because there is no way to be absolutely certain the food inside is safe. Do not keep food in bottles or jars with bottle caps or screw-on lids - they do not keep out floodwaters.

Paper and Books

Valuable papers such as books, photographs and stamp collections can be restored with a great deal of effort. They can be rinsed and frozen (in a frost-free freezer or commercial meat locker) until you have time to work on them.

Photographs, books and other articles that are easily damaged when wet can be frozen and cleaned later when you have more time. Wash the mud off and store the articles in plastic bags and take them to a friend who has electricity. Put them in a frost free freezer to protect them from mildew and further damage until you have time to thaw and clean them. A photographer or camera shop can professionally clean wet photographs. Resist the urge to stop and clean everything you pick up. You need to get to work protecting your home, assessing all the damage and planning your recovery so that you can save and restore as much as possible.

Protecting Your Home From Further Damage

You need to make sure that there will be no damage from rain or wind. Your Home Insurance Policy may cover some of the cost of protecting your home from further damage or moving the contents to a safe place (read your policy and ask your agent what expenses are covered by your policy).

Check for Broken or Leaking Water Pipes

If you find any, cut off the water supply by turning it off at the stop tap. If you can't find it, call the Water Company for help. Also check floor drains as they may be clogged with debris. If the water pipes are not leaking, you can use your tap water for hosing and cleaning but do not drink or cook with tap water until it has been declared safe.

Drain your Cellar or Basement

For advice on pumping out please contact Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service, Pirehill, Stone, Staffordshire ST15 OBS. Tel: 08451 221155

Hose the House and its Contents

The mud left behind by floodwaters contains most of the health hazards you will face. It is very important to get rid of the mud as soon as possible. This is a lot easier if it is done before the mud dries out. Follow these steps

Make sure the electricity is turned off, unplug all appliances and lamps, remove all light bulbs and remove the cover plates to all switches and outlets that got wet.

Check your water cisterns for leaks from pipes that may have moved. Even if your water supply is not safe to drink, it can be used for cleaning the home. If you have water, hose the home down, inside and out. If you have an attachment that sprays

soap, wash and then rinse the walls and floors. Hose the furniture too and other major items that got muddy. Shovel out as much mud as possible.

First Aid at Home

It is dangerous to go back into your home because the flood may have caused structural, electrical and other hazards. After you have made things safe, take steps to protect your home and contents from further damage.

If you do not have experience in construction or electrical repair, do not try to do the work yourself. Hire a qualified contractor or an electrician.

Never use candles before, during or after a flood. Candles can easily tip over or invite child fire play.

Turn off the Electricity

Electricity and water don't mix, turn the power off at your home, even if the electricity company has turned off the electricity in your area, you must still make certain your home's power supply is disconnected. You don't want the electricity company to turn it on without warning whilst you are working on it.

The electricity must be turned off at the main break box or fuse box.

Remember that if the electrical or gas shut off controls are inside the home do not turn them off until you can safely enter your home.

Turn off the Gas

Gas appliances and pipes may have moved or broken during the flood, creating a gas leak. If you suspect a leak or smell gas, leave your home immediately and call Transco from your neighbour's home. Leave the door open and if the gas meter is outside, turn off the gas. If you have any gas appliances that were flooded you will need to clean the mud out of the pilot and the burners, but first you must turn off the gas. If in doubt, contact the supplier.

Fuel, Oil or Propane

If you have a fuel, oil or propane tank, it may have floated and broken the connecting pipes. Even an underground tank can float. Turn off the fuel valve at the tank and contact the local engineer.

Rescue the Most Valuable Items

Find and protect the irreplaceable valuables, such as money, jewellery, insurance papers and photographs. Wash the mud off before the items can dry. Put articles in a safe place such as a dry first floor or a plastic bag or take them to a friend's home.

Be patient, drying your home could take several weeks. Until your home is reasonably dry, damage caused by mildew and decay will continue. The musty odour will remain forever if the home is not thoroughly dried out.