

Weathering Floods, Storms and Power Outages

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The Suffolk County Department of Health Services from material supplied
by The New York State Department of Health



HOW TO CLEAN EVERYTHING

How should my home and belongings be cleaned after flood waters have receded?

- Porous, water-damaged materials and furnishings that cannot easily be cleaned (for example, in a washing machine) should be discarded.
- Hard, non-porous surfaces can be cleaned with non-abrasive household cleaning products mixed with water. Examples include liquid or powdered kitchen cleaners, or liquid dish or hand soap.
- If you are under a boil water alert or there is a problem with your tap water, then you first have to disinfect the water you are using for cleaning. Add one cup of unscented bleach to five gallons of water.
- Do not use ammonia or ammonia products with water that has been disinfected with bleach, as this can create hazardous fumes. Always be careful when using household cleaners or disinfectant products. Read and follow all label directions and warning labels before mixing any products.
- Be sure to thoroughly disinfect all surfaces that come in contact with food and children's play areas. You can disinfect with a solution of three tablespoons of bleach to one gallon of water (or, one cup to five gallons).

What type of disinfecting solutions or cleaners should I use?

For cleaning surfaces such as wooden furniture, hard flooring, plastic items, etc., household cleaning products such as non-abrasive liquid or powdered kitchen cleaners or liquid dish soap mixed with water are fine.

Surfaces that have been in contact with sewage should first be cleaned and then disinfected with a solution of one cup unscented bleach to five gallons of water.

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How do I clean items that were soaked with salt water?

You can remove salt water by cleaning with soap, rinsing with fresh water, and then air drying the items. However, additional care should be taken if you think the salt water also contained oil or sanitary waste. The question above talks about general disinfection and a question in the oil spill section covers cleaning oil-coated belongings, debris and building materials.

Do I need to use a dust mask to clean up my house or business and when do I need one that contains a carbon filter?

When materials are still wet or moist, a dust mask may not be needed. Dust masks are useful when sediments have dried out and cleanup of sediments or other house materials are creating an airborne dust hazard. For this work, look for a dust mask labeled N95 at the hardware store.

If there are organic vapors present, such as fuel oil or gasoline, and ventilation alone is not enough to reduce the vapor levels, a respirator containing an activated carbon filter is useful. You can buy these at the hardware store. Dust masks will not remove organic vapors.

Should I wear protective clothing when cleaning up after a flood?

Yes, you should wear rubber boots, rubber gloves, long-sleeve shirts and long pants when using cleaning products or disinfectants and when handling contaminated furnishings or building materials.

When doing work that could create dust or flying debris (such as tear-out or removing damaged or contaminated building materials), wear eye protection and a dust mask (look for a mask labeled N95 at the hardware store). N95 dust masks do not need any special fitting. A tight-fitting cloth mask is not a substitute for an N95 mask.

What should I do if there is sewage contamination in or around my home after flood waters recede?

- Sewage (human or animal solid waste) contains bacteria and viruses that could cause illness. To clean an area contaminated with sewage, wear rubber boots and gloves, long-sleeve shirts and long pants.
- If debris contaminated with sewage has dried out, you may need to wear a special dust mask (look for one labeled N95 at the hardware store) while cleaning to reduce exposure to airborne dust. N95 dust masks do not need any special fitting. A tight-fitting cloth mask is not a substitute for an N95 mask.
- Discard any items that are damaged by contaminated water and cannot be adequately cleaned and disinfected.
- Be sure to wash your hands frequently with soap and water that has been boiled or disinfected.
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Should I be concerned about exposure to lead paint during cleanup?

For homes built before 1978, lead paint may be present in the home. When you are fixing up the house after a flood you may be disturbing that lead-based paint, which could cause lead exposure. Use safe work practices to avoid exposure to lead paint when removing walls, windows, and doors. See booklet Reducing Lead Hazards When Remodeling Your Home <http://www.epa.gov/lead/pubs/rrpamph.pdf>

If there is mold present in my furnishings or other belongings can they be cleaned?

In general, moldy, porous items (items that absorb water) cannot be adequately cleaned and should not be saved. (See separate sheet on how to deal with mold.)

The following items need to be thrown away when you can see or smell mold and/or the materials have been under water:

- Carpet, carpet padding and rugs
- Upholstered furniture, mattresses and box springs
- Computers, microwaves, window air conditioning units and other electronics and appliances that have fans and were housed in moldy rooms
- Papers and books
- Fiberboard, insulation and disposable filters in your heating/cooling system.
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Items that can typically be cleaned and kept include:

- Nonporous items like china, glass, jewelry, porcelain and metal
- All-wood furniture with mold growth but otherwise in good condition
- Some electronics and small appliances (depends on flooding conditions)
- Photographs, books and valuable or important legal documents with minor levels of mold growth
- Artwork, textiles, clothing that are not physically damaged
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Can I salvage wood shelves, wood cabinets or other pieces of wood furniture that were in contact with flood water?

Yes, you can salvage wooden items such as shelves, work tables, cabinets and other pieces of furniture, but you need to clean and dry them properly.

- Clean dirt on the surfaces directly impacted by flood waters with a rag moistened with a household cleaning product such as non-abrasive liquid, powdered kitchen cleaners or liquid dish soap mixed with water. If the wood has a finish, then wipe the cleaned surfaces with a cloth moistened with wood cleaning oil.
- After cleaning, dry wooden items in a warm dry area out of the sun. Direct sunlight will cause uneven drying and shrinkage resulting in more damage.
- Don't force stuck doors or drawers; give them time to shrink back to their normal positions as they dry.
- Some items such as chair legs may come apart or veneer may peel away from dressers or tables. If you are interested in salvaging these items, keep the pieces as they can be re-glued after drying.

Can I salvage wood paneling?

If the paneling is on an insulated wall, it should be removed along with wet insulation so the wall framing can dry properly. Paneling that is removed can be cleaned, dried and reused if it is not too damaged (such as being very warped or delaminated).

If the paneling is on a wall that is not insulated, you may be able to salvage it in place if it is in an area that can be dried out quickly. Pry out the bottom of panels and wedge open with a 2 x4 to promote air circulation.

After cleaning up flood damage, when is wood framing dry enough to reinstall insulation and finished wall treatments such as sheetrock?

Following Hurricane Katrina, FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) provided this guidance: flood wetted materials can be presumed dry when their moisture content readings are 15% or less. FEMA recommends pin type moisture meters. These meters use pins to penetrate solid wood, providing the most accurate measure of moisture content. You can buy pin type moisture meters for \$150 to \$300, or your local codes enforcement official or Cornell Cooperative Extension office may have one you can use. Whether you or a contractor is doing the work, make sure the wood framing is adequately dry before moving forward.

How do I clean duct work that was flooded?

You can clean ductwork and components directly impacted by floodwater. Take the ductwork and components apart, clean with detergent, rinse and reassemble. Any porous components of a ventilation system, such as filters and insulation, should be disposed of and replaced.

Can I salvage a wooden baby crib and baby furniture? What about baby clothes in rubber bins (bins touched the water but contents inside stayed dry)? How should I clean the contents for the baby's room?

- Baby clothes that stayed dry in plastic bins are fine. The outside of the bins can be cleaned with rags moistened with household cleaning products such as non-abrasive liquid or powdered kitchen cleaners or liquid dish or hand soap mixed with water. You can clean plastic, ceramic, and other hard non-porous surfaces in this way.
- If the mattress got wet and absorbed water, it should be discarded. If the mattress is “waterproof” but you cannot unzip the outside cover and check that the cushion material is completely dry, you should discard it.
- Baby clothes, bedding, stuffed animals or other items that got wet and can be put in a washing machine, should get laundered. Any other items in the room that were porous (absorbed water) or cannot be dried quickly should be discarded. Hard, non-porous items that show signs of mold can be cleaned with soap and water.

For baby cribs and furniture, follow these steps:

- Clean cribs and furniture with household cleaning products such as non-abrasive liquid or powdered kitchen cleaners or liquid dish soap mixed with water.
- Because babies may mouth or come in contact with crib surfaces, after cleaning, they should also be disinfected. Spray or wipe down surfaces with a solution of three tablespoons of unscented bleach mixed with one gallon of water (or one cup of bleach in five gallons of water).
- Always be careful when using household cleaners or disinfectant products. Read and follow all label directions and warning labels before mixing any products. Mixing some products can create hazardous fumes. For example, never mix products containing ammonia and bleach.

Can I save my holiday decorations?

It depends on how quickly you can dry them out and how easy they are to clean. For example, tinsel and paper items that were flooded should probably be discarded. Flood damaged electric lights should be discarded unless they were kept dry inside containers. If items were boxed and the inside is clean and you can clean and dry the outside surfaces, then they are probably fine.

Glass ornaments can be cleaned with soap and water. Wood ornaments should be wiped clean with a rag moistened with detergent and water. If they have a finish, they should then be wiped with wood cleaning oil and dried in a warm area out of the sun.

What about the areas in my house that were not flooded or did not get wet? Do items in those rooms need to be cleaned?

Items that were not flooded or did not get wet do not need any special cleaning or handling. If you are fixing up other parts of your house that were flooded, try to contain dust in those construction areas and cover items in unaffected areas if possible to reduce the need for additional cleaning afterward.

Can I salvage my flood damaged photographs?

It may be possible to save water damaged photos or photos that are stuck together if you take steps right away:

- Try not to touch the surface of the wet photo with your hands.
- If the photo is firmly stuck to another surface and does not easily separate, do not attempt to pull it away. The emulsion of the photo might be pulled away from the paper, permanently removing the image.
- If there are many photos stuck together, they can be soaked in lukewarm water until they separate. Rinse gently. Place wax paper between photos and seal them in a Ziploc type bag. If your freezer is working or you have access to another freezer, place the bag with the photos in it. Later the photos can be taken to an imaging lab that can defrost and dry them. It is then recommended to have the photos scanned and copied in case further deterioration occurs.
- If no freezer is available, rinse the wet photos in clean lukewarm water and air dry them, face up, in a single layer on a clean surface such as a table covered with a towel or plastic. Place small weights on the photo corners to reduce curling. Do not dry the photos in direct sunlight.
- Remember, if undamaged negatives are available, they can always be reprinted.

Can I save important documents that were affected by flood waters?

If the water soaked valuable items such as important documents:

- Rinse off flood debris
- Wrap each page separately in freezer paper or wax paper
- Seal in a Ziploc-type bag
- Put the bag in the freezer
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This will prevent mold growth until you can check with a professional restoration company about restoring them.