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Health and Safety Risks of Entering Flooded Buildings

Going Back Inside and Being Safe:

A building that has been damaged by rising floodwater is likely to be a dangerous place. You will be taking some risks when you go into a flooded building to salvage your belongings, to clean or just to look. This is a description of what some of those safety and health risks are, and a guide for reducing your risk. This information will help you decide whether or not you should enter a flooded building.

If you are going to enter a flooded building, particularly for cleaning, use this protective equipment: **rubber or hard-soled boots, rubber gloves, a N-95 disposable dust mask, and a hard hat and safety glasses for overhead work.**

Safety Hazards

The greatest threat you are likely to face in a flooded home is injury. Among other hazards, there may be **electrical** hazards, **structural** hazards, **hazardous materials**, and risk of **injury** to your hands, back, knees or shoulders. Children should not be allowed in homes that are being inspected or repaired.

Electrical

If water has come in contact with electrical circuits, and especially if the water rose above the electrical outlets, **turn off power** at the main breaker or fuse on the service panel. Do not turn power back on until electrical equipment has been repaired and inspected by a qualified electrician. Check with your county building inspector.

Do not enter flooded areas or wet buildings if the power is on.

Structural

Never assume that water-damaged structures are safe. You can not be sure that a building is stable until an engineer or building inspector has inspected it. Leave immediately if shifting or unusual noises signal a possible collapse of the building.

Household Hazardous Materials

Floodwaters can cause containers of hazardous materials such as pesticides, fuel or gasoline to spill indoors. If there is a noticeable chemical odor and/or a spilled container indoors, contact your local health department or fire department for help.

Avoid skin contact with contaminated materials or contaminated water and keep the area well ventilated or, even better, play it safe and leave.

Injury

Be careful when handling or lifting heavy loads like furniture or carpet. To avoid back injury, try not to lift loads of more than 50 pounds per person. Wear **rubber boots** or **hard-soled boots**, preferably with **steel toes**, when working and lifting.

If a building has been flooded to the ceiling or if you are doing work that is higher than your shoulders, you should wear a **hard hat and safety glasses or goggles**.

Fatigue

You are most likely to be injured when you are tired and not paying attention to common-sense safety issues. Take the breaks you need, and never drink alcohol when you are working in a flooded building.

Health Risks

You may come in contact with biological hazards that could cause illness if you are exposed by breathing

or swallowing the contaminants. Some contaminants like **bacteria or viruses** may be left indoors by floodwater, while **fungi** or mold may grow indoors after the water has left.

Bacteria and Viruses

Some of these microscopic organisms, particularly those from sewage, will be in floodwater and mud or sediment left by floodwater. If you accidentally swallow sediment or flood water that is contaminated, you might develop gastrointestinal (digestive tract) illness. Because there is so much water involved in flooding, the concentration of organisms will be diluted, and the risk of disease is small. You can nearly eliminate that risk by wearing **rubber gloves** while working, **not eating or smoking** in the house, and by **frequent hand washing**. This risk is similar indoors and outdoors.

If you get a cut or a puncture wound that is exposed to flood water, there is some risk of **tetanus** and you should be vaccinated if you haven't had a tetanus vaccination or "booster" in the past 5 years. You should get the tetanus vaccine every 10 years whether there is a disaster or not. No other **vaccinations** are recommended because of flooding.

Fungi (Mold and Mildew)

Many building materials, furniture and other items that stay wet for more than a few days will grow moldy. Mold colonies are the fuzzy or patchy white, green, brown or black growths that you will see on wallboard, wood furniture and cabinets, clothing, wall studs, and almost any other surface.

Mold releases tiny spores and other cells into the air that can cause allergic illness like hay fever (coughing, sneezing, irritated eyes), asthma symptoms, or other respiratory illness that can be serious. Some molds may also produce toxins that could cause numbers of other illnesses. We are exposed to mold every day, indoors and out, but mold contamination can be quite severe in a flooded building. The risk is greatest for people with allergies, asthma, and the very old or very young.

Exposure to mold will be greatest when you move or disturb materials that are moldy. **Wet the mold** with a soapy solution from a sprayer before you move it to reduce the release of spores. Do this even if the material is wet because the mold probably won't be wet. Remember that mold can still make you sick even after you have sprayed **disinfectants** to kill it.

If you enter a flooded building, wear a **dust mask** or respirator to reduce your exposure to mold. Look for a mask with "**NIOSH**" approval and an **N-95** rating. Both of these marks should be on the respirator and the container. Look for the masks at your hardware or home supply store if they are not available from your local health department.

Remember that the masks are **Disposable** and should be thrown away at the end of the day. Read and follow the instructions on the mask package. For more information about flood clean up and cleaning mold ask your health department or a Red Cross volunteer for a copy of the Red Cross/FEMA Document: ["Repairing Your Flooded Home."](#)

The most important thing you can do to protect yourself is to use common sense and be aware of safety and health risks, and do not enter a building that is clearly unsafe.