

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Floods and Your Health



Burlington County Health Department

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Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

Burlington County Health Department
Health Starts Here

Water Quality

Listen for public announcements on the safety of the municipal water supply. Flooded, private water wells will need to be tested and disinfected after flood waters recede. Questions about testing should be directed to your local or state health departments.

Water for Drinking and Cooking

Safe drinking water includes bottled, boiled, or treated water. Your state or local health department can make specific recommendations for boiling or treating drinking water in your area. Here are some general rules concerning water for drinking and cooking. Remember:

- Do not use contaminated water to wash dishes, brush your teeth, wash and prepare food, or make ice.
- If you use bottled water know where it came from. Otherwise, water should be boiled or treated before use. Drink only bottled, boiled, or treated water until your supply is tested and found safe.
- Boiling water kills harmful bacteria and parasites. Bringing water to a rolling boil for 5 minutes will kill most organisms.
- Water may be treated with chlorine or iodine tablets, or by mixing six drops ($\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon) of unscented, ordinary household chlorine bleach per gallon of water. Mix the solution thoroughly, and let stand for about thirty minutes. However, this treatment will not kill parasitic organisms.

Containers for water should be rinsed with a bleach solution before reusing them. Use water storage tanks and other types of containers with caution. For example, fire truck storage tanks, as well as previously used cans or bottles may be contaminated with microbes or chemicals. Do not rely on untested devices for decontaminating water.

Do not eat any food that may have come into contact with flood water. Discard any food without a waterproof container if there is any chance that it has come into contact with flood water. Undamaged, commercially canned foods can be saved if you remove the can labels, thoroughly wash the cans, and then disinfect them with a solution consisting of one cup of bleach in 5 gallons of water. Re-label your cans, including expiration date, with a marker. Food containers with screw-caps, snap-lids, crimped caps (soda pop bottles), twist caps, flip tops, and home canned foods should be discarded if they have come into contact with flood water because they cannot be disinfected. For infants, use only pre-prepared canned baby formula that requires no added water, rather than powdered formulas prepared with treated water.

Precautions When Returning to Your Home

Electrical power and natural gas or propane tanks should be shut off to avoid fire, electrocution, or explosions. Try to return to your home during the daytime so that you do not have to use any lights. Use battery-powered flashlights and lanterns, rather than candles, gas lanterns, or torches. If you smell gas or suspect a leak, turn off the main gas valve, open all windows, and leave the house immediately. Notify the gas company or the police or fire departments or State Fire Marshal's office, and do not turn on the lights or do anything that could cause a spark. Do not return to the house until you are told it is safe to do so.

Cleanup of Flood Water

When returning to your home after a flood, be aware that flood water may contain sewage. Protect yourself and your family by following these steps:

- Keep children and pets out of the affected area until cleanup has been completed
- Wear rubber boots, rubber gloves, and goggles during cleanup
- Remove and discard items that cannot be washed with disinfectant (such as mattresses, carpeting, rugs, upholstered furniture, cosmetics, stuffed animals, most paper products).
- Remove and discard drywall and insulation that has been contaminated with sewage or flood waters
- Thoroughly clean and sanitize all hard surfaces (such as flooring, concrete, molding, wood and metal furniture, countertops, appliances, sinks)
- Help the drying process by using fans, air conditioners, and dehumidifiers
- After completing clean up, wash your hands with soap and water. If your water has been compromised, use water that has been boiled for 1 minute and allowed to cool.
 - Or you may use water that has been disinfected for personal hygiene use (solution of $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon [~ 0.75 milliliters] of household bleach per 1 gallon of water). Let it stand for 30 minutes. If the water is cloudy, use a solution of $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon (~ 1.5 milliliters) of household bleach per 1 gallon of water.
- Wash all soiled clothing and clothing worn during cleanup in hot water and detergent. These should be washed separately from uncontaminated clothes.
- Have your onsite waste-water system professionally inspected and serviced

Health Risks

Flood waters and standing waters pose numerous health risks, including infectious diseases, chemical hazards, and injuries.

Eating or drinking anything contaminated by flood waters can cause diarrheal disease. To protect yourself and your family:

- Practice good hygiene and handwashing after contact with flood waters
 - Do not allow children to play in flood water areas or with toys that have been contaminated
 - Wash hands, drink, and cook with only bottled water, or water that has been boiled for at least 1 minute
 - Bathe in a solution of $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon bleach per gallon of water, and allow to sit for 30 minutes before use
- Open wounds and rashes exposed to flood waters can become infected. To protect yourself:
- Avoid exposure to flood waters if you have an open wound
 - Cover open wounds with a waterproof bandage
 - Keep open wounds as clean as possibly by washing well with soap and clean water
 - If a wound develops redness, swelling, or drainage, seek medical attention right away

Be aware of chemical hazards during floods. Rushing waters may have moved hazardous and/or industrial chemicals from their normal storage places.

Flood water poses drowning risks for everyone, regardless of their ability to swim. Swiftly moving shallow water can be deadly, and even shallow standing water can be dangerous for small children. Vehicles do not provide adequate protection from flood waters. They can be swept away or may stall in moving water.

For more information:

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/disasters/floods/

FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) website at www.ready.gov/floods

Burlington County Health Department at (609) 265-5548