Iowa Department of Public Health
Division of Environmental Health

After the Flood: What to do about Personal Items

Overview: Sewage and chemicals found in flood waters may have contaminated your clothing, furniture, and bedding. Some items can be saved, while other items need to be thrown out. Start cleaning as soon as possible to prevent further damage.

Where do I Start?

Sort what you can keep and what you need to throw away. If there is any doubt about an item, the safest action is throw it away and buy new. Clean any salvageable non-porous (does not absorb water) items with detergent or soap and water. Then, wipe down or wash with a solution of bleach and water. Prepare the bleach solution following the manufacturer's label instructions for disinfecting.

Clothing and Cloth Materials

Decide what you can keep. Many items labeled "dry clean only" and other damaged items are already ruined. Throw these away.

- Separate wet items to keep clothing colors from running together.
- If you cannot wash clothing right away, rinse items with clean water. Reshape clothing and lay flat to air dry.
- Wash clothing on the hottest setting possible. Then rinse with bleach and water solution. If clothing cannot be bleached, use a color-safe (oxygen) bleach product.
- Reshape dry-cleanable items and lay flat to dry. Dry cleaning may not be effective.

Upholstered Furniture

It is best to throw out upholstered furniture that has been saturated with flood waters. If the furniture has only had minimal contact with flood waters, remove the fabric. Plan to re-upholster. Throw away all fabric, padding and stuffing that is contaminated with flood waters.

- Clean the furniture with soap and water.
- Disinfect by wiping down the furniture with bleach and water solution.
- Dry the furniture completely. Use a fan and indirect heat. Air drying outside may be effective. To protect exposed wood, dry in direct sunlight.

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Bedding

It is best to throw out mattresses and pillows that are contaminated with flood waters. It is possible to clean other bedding.

- Rinse bedding with clean water to remove mud and other debris.
- Wash bedding in detergent and water. Use the hottest water possible.
- Disinfect by rinsing in a bleach and water solution.
- Dry in the dryer at the hottest setting possible or air dry in the sunlight.

Carpet and Rugs

Throw away carpet and pads that are heavily contaminated with flood water, sewage, and other residue. You may be able to save carpet and rugs that have been soaked with cleaner groundwater. It is important to dry out carpet quickly to prevent mold from growing.

- Remove carpet and rugs from the house. Throw away carpet pads.
- Soak up excess water from carpets with a wet vacuum and blankets and towels.
- Shampoo the carpet or rug.
- Disinfect by using a sponge dipped in bleach and water solution. Test first to make sure the color does not fade out.
- Rinse several times with clear water sponged onto the carpet.
- Allow carpet to dry completely.
- Do not replace any carpet or rugs until the subfloors are dry.

Appliances

Dirty flood water can cause many problems if it gets into your appliances. If it gets into the electrical parts, they can corrode and cause the appliance to short out. If flood water gets into the insulation, it can cause odor and mold problems. Many flood-damaged appliances can be saved, but first they must be completely dried. Flood-damaged appliances should be checked by a service technician.

Be sure the electricity is completely shut off in your house before removing any appliance!

- Motors, electrical parts, and metal parts need to be cleaned.
- Do not hose down appliances. Spraying water into appliances can cause more damage.
- Remove and replace any wet insulation inside the appliance.
- Clean the outside of the appliance with a household cleaner or soap and water. Clean the inside with 1-2 tablespoons baking soda mixed in 1 quart of water.
- Disinfect by rinsing the inside and outside with a solution of bleach and water.

Refrigerated appliances contain a refrigerant gas that can harm the environment. They should not be dumped or put in a landfill. Please check with your local landfill to find out where to drop off flood-damaged appliances for proper recycling.

Source: Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service

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