

Frequently Asked Questions Following a Flood

Script for Call Takers

8/19/09 1700 hrs

Q1: I'm concerned about my health or the health of my family. What are some basic things I should do?

A1:

- Basic hygiene is very important during this emergency period. Always wash your hands with soap and water that has been boiled or disinfected before eating and after toilet use, cleanup activities or handling items contaminated by floodwater or sewage. When clean water and soap are unavailable, waterless hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol are an appropriate substitute.
- Flood waters may contain fecal matter from sewage systems, agricultural and industrial waste and septic tanks. If you have open cuts or sores exposed to the floodwater, keep them as clean as possible by washing them with soap and disinfected or boiled water. Apply antibiotic ointment to reduce the risk of infection.
- Do not allow children to play in floodwater or with toys that are contaminated by floodwater.
- If floodwaters are covering your septic tank and leach field you should not use any flush toilets attached to the system.
- Anyone with immediate medical needs should visit the Tri-County Urgent Care Treatment Center at the Gowanda Elementary School on Aldrich St. (9:00 AM – 5:00 PM)

Q2: Are there any Boil Water Advisories currently in effect?

A2:

No, there are currently no Boil Water Advisories in effect for Cattaraugus or Erie Counties.

Q3: What is a Boil Water Advisory?

A3:

A Boil Water Advisory is a precautionary measure taken by the local health department and the municipal water supplier. The process of boiling water removes any potential bacteriological contamination that may of resulted from the recent flooding. The local health department and the municipal water supplier will be conducting bacteriological sampling to ensure that your water is safe to drink. Once the satisfactory test results have been confirmed, the advisory will be lifted.

Q4: Is the water in my house safe to drink?

A4:

Assume *all* water sources are unsafe until approved by your local health department. Until water sources are approved, use bottled water or water distributed by a health department approved tank truck until your well is usable or public water has been restored. Local Health Officials will utilize the media outlets to notify the public of any changes to the water supply.

- If your well has been covered over with floodwaters, it should be disinfected.
- Follow local officials' water usage restrictions to conserve water.
- If you must use water of unknown quality for drinking, cooking, making ice, making prepared drinks, and brushing teeth, it should be disinfected.

Q5: How do I disinfect my water?

A5:

- Boiling water will kill most types of disease-causing organisms that may be present. If the water is cloudy, filter it through clean cloths or allow it to settle, and draw off the clear water for boiling. Boil the water for one minute, let it cool, and store it in clean containers with covers.
- If you can't boil water, you can disinfect it using household bleach. Bleach will kill some, but not all, types of disease-causing organisms that may be in the water. If the water is cloudy, filter it through clean cloths or allow it to settle, and draw off the clear water for disinfection. Add 1/8 teaspoon (or 8 drops) of regular, unscented, liquid household bleach for each gallon of water, stir it well and let it stand for 30 minutes before you use it. Store disinfected water in clean containers with covers.
- If you have a well that has been flooded, the water should be tested and disinfected after flood waters recede. If you suspect that your well may be contaminated, contact your local or state health department or agriculture extension agent for specific advice.

Q6: I'm concerned about mold growing as a result of the moisture in my home, how can I prevent the growth of mold?

A6:

- Moisture that enters buildings from leaks or flooding accelerates mold growth. Molds can cause disease, trigger allergic reactions and continue to damage materials after the storm.
- Remove standing water from your home or office. Remove wet materials promptly and ventilate; use fans and dehumidifiers if possible.
- If mold growth has already occurred, it is best to have a professional remove it.
- Individuals with known mold allergies or asthma should never clean or remove mold.
- Be careful about mixing household cleaners and disinfectants, as combining certain types of products can produce toxic fumes and result in injury or death.

Q7: Can any of the furnishings and belongings in the home be saved?

A7:

In general, do not try to save moldy, porous items (items that absorb water).

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
- Wall boards up to 2 feet above the water line
- Computers, microwaves, window A/C units and other electronics/appliances that had fans and were housed in moldy rooms
- Papers and books
- Food items, including canned foods that were in contact with flood waters

Items that can typically be saved 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

Q8: How can I cleanup my household?

A8:

- Remove standing water
- Walls, hard-surfaced floors and many other household surfaces must be cleaned with soap and water and disinfected with a solution of 1 cup of bleach to five gallons of water.
- Thoroughly disinfect surfaces that come in contact with food and children's play areas.
- Replace fiberboard, insulation and disposable filters in your heating/cooling system.
- Wear rubber boots and waterproof gloves during clean-up.

Q9: What should I do with the garbage that I produce as I start cleaning my house?

A9:

- Store any garbage in watertight, rodent/insect-proof containers with tight-fitting covers. Use plastic liners if available.
- Avoiding locating garbage near your well.
- Place your garbage curbside and separate it into piles for metal items, household items, and wood/tree limbs.
- Household Hazardous Waste (paint, batteries, etc.) will not be picked up. A Hazardous Waste Drop-off Day may be scheduled in the near future. See below.

Q10: What types of items will NOT be picked up by my municipality?

A10:

Household Hazardous Waste will not be picked up.

Your county may be scheduling a Household Hazardous Waste Drop-Off Day soon.

Acceptable items for the Household Hazardous Waste drop-off day include:

- Pesticides, fertilizers, pool and household chemicals and cleaners
- Oil-based paints, spray cans
- Oil, gasoline, kerosene, antifreeze
- Paint thinner, stripper, and solvents
- Batteries (lead acid and rechargeables)
- Mercury (thermometers, thermostats, metal)
- Propane tanks and cylinders

Q11: When will the storm debris be picked up?

A11:

Flood debris will be picked by the local Highway Department/Public Works Department as time permits.

Q12: Is there an increased risk of mosquito-borne illness with the standing water?

A12:

Yes, heavy rains and flooding can lead to an increase in mosquitoes that may be infected with West Nile virus. See also A11.

Q13: How can I protect myself and my family from mosquito-borne illnesses?

A13:

Remain diligent in your personal mosquito protection efforts. Avoid being outdoors when mosquitoes are most active. For many species, this is during the dusk and dawn hours. Also:

- Wear clothing that covers most of your skin.
- Repellents containing DEET are preferable.
- Use strictly according to label instructions. Do not allow children to apply repellents and avoid applying repellents to the hands of young children.
- Check around your home to rid the area of standing water.
- Eliminate other breeding sites—remove old tires and turn over or remove empty plastic containers.

Q14: Can I flush my toilet?

A14:

If floodwaters are covering your septic tank and leach field, you should not use any flush toilets attached to the system. Septic systems rely on gravity to pull the wastewater down and away from the surface. When the system is flooded, wastewater can rise and mix with surface water, exposing people to human waste. If you are unable to use the toilets in your home, use portable toilets such as the type used for camping.

Q15: My plumbing is functioning slowly or sluggishly, what should I do?

A15:

Conserve water as much as possible. Minimize the use of appliances such as dishwashers and washing machines.

Do not have the septic tank pumped.

If you cannot use your plumbing without creating a sanitary nuisance (exposure of sewage), consider moving to a new location until conditions improve.

Do not have the septic tank and drainfield repaired until the ground has dried.

Q16: What types of foods from my home are safe to eat?

A16:

Raw foods that were exposed to flood waters may be contaminated and should not be eaten.

Food and food containers that have been in or splashed with floodwaters need to be either thrown away or properly cleaned.

Canned foods can be used unless the cans are swollen, rusted, seriously dented, or the contents cannot be identified. Wash off food cans that are still sealed and disinfect them for five minutes in a bleach solution of two teaspoons of bleach per gallon of water.

Discard food containers with lids that are screwed on or pressed on (such as soda and beer bottles). They cannot be cleaned adequately.

Q17: Where can I buy groceries?

A17:

Jubilee Foods

10 Buffalo St, Gowanda

(716) 532-5545

Store Hours: Monday – Saturday 7:00 AM – 10:00 PM, Sunday 8:00 AM – 8:00 PM

Kwik Fill

290 Buffalo St, Gowanda

(716) 532-2855

Store Hours: *Not 24/7*

Q18: How can I clean and disinfect dishes, utensils and cookware?

A18:

Clean and disinfect dishes, utensils and cookware in a solution of two teaspoons bleach per gallon of water.

Do NOT use this method on sterling silver tableware. The bleach will cause these items to tarnish. Sanitize sterling silver by putting it in boiling water for at least two minutes.

Q19: Why is there oil in my basement?

A19:

If the oil tank was not properly fastened to the floor, oil may appear in the standing water of a flooded basement.

Q20: What should I do with the oil in my basement?

A20:

The oil should be cleaned up before the water is pumped out. If the oil is not removed first, then the walls and floor will be coated with oil as the water is removed. Oil should not be discharged to the ground outside because oil can contaminate drinking water wells and storm water runoff. Environmental contractors have special apparatus to contain the spilled oil. Contact the Department of Environmental Conservation Region 9 office at (716) 851-7000 for more information.

Q21: What happened to the patients hospitalized at Tri-County Hospital?

A21:

Patients that were medically able were discharged, others were transported to Lakeshore Hospital located at Routes 5 & 20 at Seneca RD, Irving 14081. Telephone number: (716) 934-2654.

Q22: When will Tri-County hospital re-open?

A22:

Tri-County is working to re-open as soon as possible. Once the facility is able to re-open, the public will be informed through regular media channels (news, TV, radio, etc.)

Q23: How should we proceed to file a loss or damage claim?

A23: At Governor David A. Paterson's request, the Federal Emergency Management Agency will be conducting preliminary damage assessments with the New York State Emergency Management Office to determine if federal assistance can be made available. If homeowners, renters or businesses suffered damage in the flooding, you should first contact your insurance company to see if your loss is covered by your policy. You should also take pictures of the damage and keep records of anything that has been discarded and receipts for anything replaced, repaired or damaged. As additional direction becomes available, it will be made available to the community through media, internet outlets and flyers distributed at local municipal buildings.

Q24 What should I do if I think I have been exposed to Asbestos?

A24

If you have to remove all or part of walls or floors, lead or asbestos-containing materials (for example, paint, plaster, pipe wrap) could be disturbed, causing lead dust or asbestos fibers to be spread around your home. Lead is a highly toxic metal that produces a range of health effects, particularly in young children. Long term exposure to airborne asbestos can cause lung cancer and mesothelioma, a cancer of the chest and abdominal lining. If you know or suspect that your home contains lead-based paint or asbestos, contact the New York State Department of Health at 800-458-1158 for information about steps you should take to avoid contaminating your home.

Q25 Where can I receive assistance for immediate needs?

A25

Residents of Cattaraugus and Erie County should call 995-2164.

Q26 Where can I go for additional information?

A26

Residents of Cattaraugus County may visit the following link:

<http://ww2.cattco.org/news/2009583-health-precautions-flood-victims>

Residents of Erie County may visit the following link:

www.erie.gov/health

All residents may visit the following link:

<http://www.health.state.ny.us/environmental/emergency/flood/index.htm>

http://www.health.state.ny.us/environmental/indoors/air/docs/flood_cleanup_guide.pdf

Additionally, information packets are available at several municipal locations including Town Halls, Libraries, and Post Offices.

Family Assistance Center

Human Service Agencies have a coordinated response to families to assist with a variety of human needs. Services will be accessible through the Family Assistance Center at the Gowanda Elementary School on Aldrich St. from 9:00 to 5:00 PM.

Services will include:

- Food, Water
- Temporary assistance, food stamps, temporary shelter applications, including food replacement for those with food stamps
- Information regarding furnace, hot water tank, appliance and furniture replacement
- General Health information, assistance with medications, and nursing staff
- Crisis and ongoing counseling/mental health services
- Linkage with other needed services
- Senior For those over the age of 60:
 - Water, shelf stable meals, assistance with hot water tank and furnace replacement, assistance with clean up and linkage with other needed services.

Additional Contact Information:

- Red Cross After-hours Emergency Needs: Cattaraugus County 372-5800
- Red Cross Information and Referral: Monday – Friday 664-5115
- Cattaraugus County Offices/Departments
 - Office of the Aging: 373-8032 or 1-800-462-2901 (Emergency food, hot water tanks, furnace)
 - Mental Health: 945-5211 or in Gowanda 532-3325 ext. 5014
 - Community Action, Inc.: 945-1041 ext. 149
 - Department of Health: 373-8050
 - Department of Social Services: 373-8065 (housing and food stamps)