

Returning to a disaster-affected house or building

Fact sheet

If you have been evacuated from your home because of a disaster, there are measures you should take on your return to ensure the safety and health of your family. Similar measures should be taken if you are entering a workplace or other building affected by a disaster such as storm, cyclone or flood.

Safety considerations

- Before returning, ensure that local officials (such as Police, State Emergency Services (SES) or council) have declared the area safe.
- When you return home, check that all power and gas supplies have been turned off. This includes any external sources, such as pool pumps. If your house sustained damage or flooding, an electrician will need to check the wiring before power is restored.
- Do not use a generator to create power unless the generator is in a well-ventilated area. If a generator is used in an enclosed area, there will be a build-up of toxic exhaust fumes.
- Be aware that the structural integrity of the building may be affected and may require attention. This could also include pools, spas, septic tanks, pool fencing and other external structures.
- Beware of dangerous wildlife, such as spiders, snakes and other animals, which may have moved into your home during or after a storm.
- When you are cleaning up, wear protection and ensure any wounds are treated and covered.

Protect yourself from injury and illness

The likelihood of illness and injury increases when entering premises that have been affected by storms or floods, and when cleaning up. Floodwater is often contaminated by sewage from overflowing sewerage or septic systems, and agricultural or industrial wastes and chemicals.

To stay safe and healthy

- avoid contact with floodwater—do not walk or drive through floodwater
- regularly wash your hands
- wear protective clothes such as long sleeve shirts, eye-wear, gloves and rubber boots. This will help minimise the risk of diseases, such as tetanus (from exposed open wounds), gastrointestinal infections, and mosquito-borne diseases
- if you are injured or suffer a cut during the clean-up process, clean the wound and seek medical attention immediately, as you may need a tetanus vaccination

- wear sunscreen and a hat when working outdoors, and drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.

Ensure safe drinking water

Only drink water that you know is safe, such as bottled water or water that has been boiled. Normal water supplies may be contaminated. Do not drink or use the town water supply until the local authorities confirm it is safe. Once the local authority confirms the safety of the water supply, take the following steps if floodwater has submerged the taps in your home

- run the taps for a few minutes to remove any contaminated water inside the tap
- remove any screens, flow regulators and aerators and thoroughly clean the tap and all parts with hot water and detergent
- apply a mild disinfectant to the tap and its parts
- rinse, reassemble the tap and run it for a few minutes before use

For cleaning purposes, use water from taps that have not been submerged or contaminated

Ensuring a safe food supply

Throw away the following

- foods that have come into direct contact with flood water
- perishable foods that have been left unrefrigerated for more than four hours
- canned foods that are open, bulging or damaged
- cans that are still sealed and undamaged can be used after their labels have been removed, and after they have been washed and sanitised
- any medicines/drugs that have had contact with floodwater or have not been kept appropriately refrigerated, as per the label
- any home-grown fruits and vegetables that have been partially or completely submerged may be contaminated with harmful pathogens and should be thrown out.

If in doubt about the safety of any food, throw it out.

Cleaning buildings and yards

- Assume anything that came into contact with floodwater is contaminated. Keep pets and children away from the area until it has been properly cleaned.
- Open doors and windows to increase ventilation and remove dampness. Any surfaces with mould should be cleaned with a household detergent or a white vinegar solution.
- Remove and discard household materials that cannot be cleaned and disinfected, such as carpets, mattresses, rugs and children's soft toys.
- All hard surfaces (floors, walls, benches), utensils and crockery, and outdoor play equipment, should be cleaned with hot water and household detergent, disinfected (for example with a bleach-based sanitiser) and given a final rinse with clean water.

- Materials or surfaces that contain asbestos should NOT be cleaned with hard brushes, water blasters or other high-pressure cleaners. These surfaces should be cleaned by hand with soapy water and a cloth or sponge.
- Remove and empty any water from containers in your yard, such as buckets, pot plant bases and tyres, to minimise mosquito breeding.
- If yards are contaminated with mud from floods or rising water levels, let the mud dry out before using the yard.
- Pools and spas affected by floodwater should be emptied. Contact your local council to ensure an appropriate disposal method is undertaken. If you are unable to empty your pool/spa for a period of time due to ground saturation or some other reason, check it routinely to ensure mosquitoes are not breeding in the water. Once the pool/spa is emptied, thoroughly clean and sanitise the pool, seeking advice from your local pool shop on the best method.

Managing waste

During clean-up, large amounts of waste can be generated. Waste management services provided by your local council may be altered after a disaster—either deferred, or extra services provided. Waste that is not managed/stored appropriately may become a health hazard and may attract unwanted pests and vermin. To minimise the health risks, ensure that

- perishable wastes, such as foods and other organic waste that may decompose, are stored in a sealed bag for collection
- hazardous wastes, such as chemicals, medicines, gas tanks and asbestos containing material, are not left on the kerbside. These items should be left in a secure location. Contact your local council for advice on disposal methods or collection times
- check with your local council to see if there are separate collections for green waste or building waste
- large animal carcasses are buried to minimise disease insects and animal scavengers.

Further information

- Department of Health <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/disaster>, <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/foodsafety>
- Queensland Government <https://www.asbestos.qld.gov.au/resources/safe-work-procedures/safe-cleanup-storm-damaged-materials-may-contain-asbestos>
- Contact your doctor, hospital or health clinic
- Call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) at any time
- Contact 13 QGOV (13 74 68) for your nearest Public Health Unit.