

Post Flood: Key Facts About Infectious Disease

Although infectious diseases are a frightening prospect, widespread outbreaks of infectious disease after floods are not common in the United States. Rare and deadly exotic diseases, such as cholera or typhoid, do not suddenly break out after hurricanes and floods in areas where such diseases do not naturally occur. Common gastrointestinal (stomach) and respiratory (breathing) ailments are more likely after natural disasters because clean drinking water may be hard to find and maintaining basic hygiene becomes more difficult.

Flood waters contaminated with sewage can pose risk to your health especially gastro intestinal illnesses such as vomiting and diarrhea if ingested, skin rashes from direct contact, and respiratory illness if sewage allowed to dry and becomes airborne. The length of time bacteria, viruses, and parasites from sewage contaminated flood waters survive on outdoor hard surfaces, grasses and in soil depends on many factors including temperature, humidity, acidity of soil, and sun exposure. Time alone helps decrease the risk from these infectious agents as sunlight and elevated temperatures help to kill them and rain waters help for flush them from the soil. To decrease your risk of developing illness from these infectious agents:

- Clean up any visible sewage and outdoor hard surfaces exposed to the flood waters as you would indoor surfaces -
http://www.ct.gov/dph/lib/dph/environmental_health/environmental_engineering/docs/Sewage_Backup_Fact_Sheet.pdf
 - Wear protective eyewear, gloves, and boots
 - Wear goggles when hosing off items to prevent eye splash
 - Avoid direct contact with sewage material
 - Wash your hands after cleaning
 - Protect all cuts and scrapes. Immediately wash and disinfect any wound that comes into contact with sewage
 - Never mix bleach with ammonia – it makes a deadly gas!
 - Wash the affected area with detergent solution to remove surface dirt and contamination. (Don't skip this step, or the disinfection step will be ineffective! Allow it to air-dry. Apply a disinfectant labeled as being bactericidal (kills bacteria) or a solution of 1 part bleach + 9 parts water. Disinfectants and/or bleach should remain in contact with the items for 15-20 minutes to be effective. Allow it to air-dry.
 - Discard porous materials
- For gardens
 - Discard all produce (fruits and vegetables) from gardens that came in contact with flood waters or flood water soaked soil. Regardless of how the produce looks it is contaminated and increases your risk for illness.
 - Avoid digging in soil for several weeks. Infectious agents found deeper in the soil take longer to be removed by nature as they are exposed to less sunlight and are less affected by temperature. If you must dig take special precautions as stated above (gloves, goggles, boots, etc.)

Post Flood: Key Facts About Infectious Disease

- For yards
 - Children should not be allowed to play in yards affected by flood waters for two weeks after the flood waters have subsided. General hygiene practices should be continued thereafter to include washing hands and soiled skin as well as protecting cuts and scrapes. Low levels of some infectious agents do persist in the environment in normal conditions and can remain slightly elevated after a flood for several months.
 - Household pet fur and paws that have come in contact with soil and grass that has been soiled with flood waters should be cleaned before bringing the pet indoors. Soap and water (such as liquid dish soap or hand soap) should be used as you would wash human hands.
 - Lawn care should be avoided until any gross contamination has been cleared and nature has had some time to clear these pathogens naturally (two weeks). It would be prudent to wear a mask while cutting the lawn or doing any yard work for the next several months. If you have any respiratory issues such as COPD or asthma you should consult your physician on the risks of performing these activities and wearing a mask.
- Special populations
 - Immunocompromised individuals (such as those undergoing cancer treatment or on long term steroids) should take additional precaution to avoid exposure to sewage or sewage contaminated areas. Consider avoiding contaminated areas until these can be cleaned and disinfected by friends, family members, or possibly a professional (see sewage backup fact sheet).

It cannot be stressed enough to avoid touching your eyes and mouth after touching potentially contaminated surfaces including yards and soil. Please remember to practice good hygiene practices such as washing your hands thoroughly after contact and prevent contact of open cuts and scrapes by covering them.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact your primary healthcare provider. For more information, call your local health department or the Connecticut Department of Public Health at 860-509-7994.