



Cleaning up After Hurricane Harvey: Chlorine Bleach Is Your Friend

By the Water Quality & Health Council

After the shock and heartbreak of experiencing a flood comes the clean up to prevent further damage and spread of disease. Flood cleanup starts with removing flood water (usually contaminated with sewage) and drying the affected areas. Evaluate all items touched by flood waters, deciding which to keep and which to toss. Whenever possible, use a disinfecting solution of chlorine bleach to disinfect items touched by flood waters.



Houston residents walk across a flooded street on August 27, 2017. Hurricane Harvey dumped trillions of gallons of water in several Gulf states, leading to devastating flooding.

- When using a disinfecting solution to clean up after a flood, remember to:
 - Wear gloves and protective clothing. Do not touch your face or eyes.
 - Change the disinfecting solution often and whenever it is cloudy.
 - Be thorough. Wash and dry everything well.
 - When finished, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, even if you have worn gloves.
 - Wash contaminated clothing in the hottest possible water with detergent and chlorine bleach if fabric instructions permit.
- If an item got wet, assume it is contaminated.
- Disinfecting works best when all loose dirt and debris are removed first. That's why the CDC recommends first washing surfaces with soap and warm, clean water. Next, use a household bleach solution to disinfect.
- Prepare a bleach solution (3/4 cup regular strength chlorine bleach or 1/2 cup concentrated bleach to one gallon of water) to disinfect walls, floors and other surfaces touched by floodwaters. Keep the area wet for at least two minutes.
- When addressing exterior surfaces, such as outdoor furniture, patios, decks and play equipment, keep surfaces wet with disinfecting solution for 10 minutes after removing loose dirt and debris

with soap and warm, clear water. This may mean wetting the surface with disinfecting solution more than once.

- Carpets and rugs that have been soaked for more than 24 hours should be discarded. If carpets and rugs were soaked for less than 24 hours, evaluate as follows: Carpets that contacted sewage-contaminated floodwater should be discarded. Carpets that contacted only clean basement seepage or lawn runoff may be dried and cleaned. Washable throw rugs usually can be cleaned adequately in a washing machine. For more information on cleaning flood-damaged carpets and rugs, see this [North Dakota State University](#) website.
- Chlorine bleach solutions degrade quickly, so be sure to make a fresh solution daily as needed. Unused solution may be discharged into the toilet or sink.

Finally, if you have a private well on your property that is below flood level, it is recommended that under non-flood conditions you extend the top of the well above the expected flood level and install proper seals on all openings into the well to prevent entry of flood waters. If a well is flooded, refer to the US Environmental Protection Agency's [What to Do After the Flood](#) for directions on decontaminating your well.

This article is excerpted from a more comprehensive article posted on August 11, titled "[Preparing for the Next Flood and its Aftermath.](#)"

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