

Returning Home After a Flood

Summary

Returning home after a flood can be a considerable undertaking. Having the proper knowledge and understanding of the most effective recovery procedures will help to make the process simple and successful. This document outlines house contents and moisture removal. Structural information will not be covered as a professional should be consulted involving all structural damage.

Background

- Flooding can be the result of several different natural disasters and is responsible for causing widespread damage to life and property. As hurricanes, tropical depressions and monsoons make landfall, severe winds, debris, and localized flooding can become a reality; resulting in massive devastation to local communities. During the past 30 years, flooding in the U.S. has resulted in an annual average of nearly \$8 billion in flood losses (adjusted for inflation) and 82 fatalities (1).
- Returning home can be a vast undertaking. You should only return home after authorities have declared it safe to return; otherwise, returning home could put yourself and family in danger (3). You should always consult a professional when in doubt about anything involving your house. Never assume that something is safe.
- Before arriving, be prepared that your house is going to be a mess. Depending on the extent of flooding, the recovery process could take an immense amount of effort.
- Prior to arrival, you should consider boarding animals as they require resources, time and space.
- Upon arriving, it's possible you will find furniture displaced, appliances upside down, water stains on the walls and cracks in the sheetrock.
- It is just as important to remain calm and watch out for your own health as it is to begin making repairs to your home. Continue to eat, drink, sleep and exercise proper hygiene throughout the course of repairs.

Procedures:

1. **Preparations** - Depending on severity of the situation, flood waters might have not receded in your area even though you were given the all clear notification by authorities. If this is the case be sure to watch for animals and snakes in flood waters. Take extra precaution when in proximity to power lines as they could be live even if they appear to be "broken."
 - Fill car/truck with fuel before returning home (3), and consider bringing the following items as it is possible that local stores will not have supplies.
 - Drinking water (a minimum of 1 gallon/person/day)
 - Non-Perishable foods
 - Soap (for washing hands and other items) and clean water (if not available)
 - Multiple gallons of bleach for cleaning and disinfecting
 - Flashlight, batteries, radio and cellphone
 - Extra clothes
 - Medications
 - Trash bags
 - Paper towels
 - Household tool kit
 - Pet supplies (if you decided to bring pets along)
 - Fans

2. Upon Arrival

- Begin by looking for exterior damage to your home. Such damage could be broken windows, water lines on the foundation, a dislocated roof, cracks in the foundation and more. Decide if it is safe to enter. If in doubt, seek the advice of a professional and never assume the risk.
- After ensuring that it is safe to enter, begin looking for interior damage to your home immediately. Look for sags in the ceiling, water marks, cracks in the sheetrock and mold/mildew. Determine if the house is structurally sound. At this point it is safe to begin recovery. Be aware that mildew may be present even if not clearly visible.



3. Recovery

- Begin throwing away items that have been in contact with the flood water and that cannot be fully disinfected or verified to be safe such as:
 - Mattresses
 - Upholstered furniture
 - Carpet
 - Food, including spoiled food
 - Medication
- Not everything should be thrown away. The following items usually can be washed to remove mud, stains, and mildew.
 - Towels
 - Clothing
 - Blankets
 - Small fabric garments
- Trash generally should be placed along the curb in a way that does not block the road. According to FEMA, a general guideline is to separate trash into six categories at the curb: electronics, large appliances, hazardous waste, vegetative debris, construction debris, and household garbage (9).
- Electrical devices may or may not be salvageable.
 - Take extra caution when evaluating electronics that were submerged in salt water as opposed to fresh water as, "Salt water may increase the corrosion rate when compared to fresh water" (8).
 - Never use wet appliances or operate appliances while standing in water.
- Clean all moldy items and hard surfaces (Use proper protective equipment)
 - Use 1 cup bleach:1 gallon water solution for moldy surfaces (5)
 - Use 1-3 Tablespoons of bleach:1 gallon of water for cleaning hard surfaces (5)(6)
- **Air flow** is the **key** to removing moisture from a house.
 - Open doors and windows to allow the interior to begin drying.
 - Wooden doors, windows, and dressers will swell with an increase in moisture. Do not force them open if seemingly frozen in place. Allow them to dry and then try again. (3)
 - True wood furniture may be salvaged after drying.
 - Use fans to push air throughout a house.
- Pump water out of basements gradually

- “If your basement has flooded, pump it out gradually (about one third of the water per day) to avoid damage. The walls may collapse and the floor may buckle if the basement is pumped out while the surrounding ground is still waterlogged. (2)”
 - Damage to important documents and photographs may be irreversible.
 - If unable to immediately begin drying documents or photographs, place them into a working freezer to prevent mold grow. (7)
 - Simple air drying is the most effective way to dry out documents and photographs. Gently place wet material in an area where air is circulating. Physical distortion is likely once paper is dried (7).
 - Do not turn on HVAC system without having it checked by a professional. “If the HVAC system was flooded with water, turning on the mold-contaminated HVAC will spread mold throughout the house.” (4)
 - If HVAC has been checked by a professional and deemed in a safe working condition, slight heat can be used to aid in the drying process. (10) Similarly, space heaters may be used to apply heat to the interior.
4. **Common Mistakes**
- Using kerosene heaters to dry the interior
 - While it is true that kerosene heaters produce heat which aids in drying, kerosene heaters also produce carbon monoxide and water during combustion. There is also an explosion risk by having an open flame in a house that could have a gas leak.

References

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