

Stay safe and healthy after storms, floods and cyclones

Fact sheet

Following the initial damage to property and infrastructure caused by storms, floods and cyclones, sickness and injury can still occur.

Water can become contaminated from the breakdown in amenities, such as power, sewerage and water supply. This can increase the risk of disease during clean up and recovery operations.

The main health risks in natural disaster areas include

- injury—such as falls, skin lacerations and exposure to fallen electricity wires
- carbon monoxide poisoning from using petrol powered generators and pumps in confined spaces
- skin infections—which, if not treated, can develop into blood infection
- snake and spider bites
- sunburn
- mosquito-borne infections
- illness from eating or drinking contaminated foods or liquids.

Follow these safety tips to stay safe and healthy during the clean-up and recovery.

Preparing to clean up

Before starting to clean up around your home or business, ensure the storm, flood or cyclone is over, it is safe to go outside and any waters have receded. Ensure you have a properly stocked first aid kit on site and

- keep yourself safe by always wearing protective clothing—such as sturdy, closed-toe shoes, loose long-sleeved shirts and trousers, thick gloves, hat and sunglasses.
- consider using a walking pole or similar, to guide you safely around—such as a piece of smooth timber (for example a broom handle or a piece of tree branch). Muddy surfaces can be extremely slippery resulting in falls that can cause fractures and other injuries.
- Clean any cuts and cover with a water-resistant dressing.



Figure 1 Recovery worker with a client

Using petrol-powered generators or pumps

Carbon monoxide poisoning is a real risk for people in the vicinity of a petrol-powered generator or pump if these are used in an enclosed area.

Make sure generators and pumps are situated in well-ventilated areas preferably outside.

Working safely onsite

When working onsite, it is crucial that you maintain good personal hygiene.

Don't walk or wade through flood water, if you can avoid it. There is an increased risk of wound infections, diarrhoea, conjunctivitis, and ear, nose and throat infections from polluted waters. Leptospirosis (a bacterial disease of humans and animals) can also be contracted from flood water.

Young children, the elderly, pregnant women, people with chronic diseases—such as diabetes and kidney disease—and people who abuse alcohol or other drugs are more prone to infections and should consider avoiding flood water and mud.

Wash your hands with soap and water or a hand sanitiser after

- contact with damaged materials, flood water or mud
- going to the toilet
- before preparing or consuming food or drink.

Protect your skin from cuts that could become infected

- clean and disinfect all wounds and keep them covered. Avoid flood water and mud if you have broken skin or wounds, especially if you have diabetes or other chronic diseases. Wounds heal quickly if the limbs are rested and elevated
- see a health professional or your doctor early for severe wounds, especially if the wound is dirty or becomes red, sore, swollen or painful.

Watch out for snakes, spiders and mosquitoes

- watch out for snakes and spiders that may have hidden inside houses or debris
- if bitten by a spider or snake apply immediate first aid and seek medical attention
- Sand-flies and mosquitoes may become a real nuisance following storms, floods and other natural disasters. Wear long sleeves and long pants and apply personal insect repellent.

Be careful of contaminated water and food

- Your local council will alert you if the local water supply is contaminated. If in doubt, water for drinking and cooking should be brought to a rolling boil and then cooled before drinking or storing in a clean, covered container in a refrigerator or cooler.
- Some food after an event may not be safe to eat, especially if power has been cut or if food has been in contact with contaminated floodwater. Contaminated food or perishable foods that have not been refrigerated should be discarded.

Waste

Contact your local council regarding waste disposal. Take all necessary precautions for handling asbestos, cement and/or debris.

Further information

- Department of Health <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/disaster>
- Contact your local council office
- Call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) at any time
- Contact 13 QGOV (13 74 68) for your nearest public health unit.