



Iowa Department of Public Health Division of Environmental Health

Personal Hygiene During and After a Flood

Overview: Basic personal hygiene is very important during an emergency period, especially in high-risk situations like a flooded area. There are safe ways to maintain personal hygiene in a flood situation to prevent the spread of germs and illnesses. Proper hand washing, bathing, clothes washing, dental hygiene, and wound care treatment will keep all people involved in flood cleanup safe and healthy.

Hand Washing

To help prevent the spread of disease that can cause illness, it is important to wash your hands often. Germs are spread when people forget to wash their hands or don't wash their hands correctly. Always wash your hands with soap and water that has been boiled or disinfected and cooled.

When Should You Wash Your Hands?

Before:

- preparing or eating food
- treating a cut or wound
- inserting or removing contact lenses

After:

- participating in flood cleanup activities
- handling articles contaminated by floodwater or sewage
- using the bathroom or changing a diaper
- handling uncooked food
- playing with a pet
- handling garbage
- tending to someone who is sick or injured
- blowing your nose
- coughing or sneezing

How Should You Wash Your Hands?

How you wash your hands is just as important as when you wash them. Just rinsing them quickly is not enough.

- use soap and warm running water or boiled, disinfected, or bottled water

- wash all surfaces thoroughly, including wrists, palms, back of hands, fingers and under fingernails
- rub hands together for at least 10-15 seconds and then rinse
- dry with a clean and/or disposable towel
- use the towel to turn off the water faucet
- if soap and water are not available, alcohol-based hand sanitizers can be used; however, they do not kill all germs
- hand sanitizers are not effective if hands are visibly dirty
- a temporary hand washing station can be created by using a large water jug that contains clean water (boiled or disinfected)

Bathing

Bathing after a water-related emergency should only be done with clean, safe water. If there is a "boil water order", listen to local authorities for further instructions. Sometimes water that is not safe to drink can be used for bathing. People coming into contact with floodwater should thoroughly rinse any exposed body parts with soap and clean water.

Clothes Washing

Washing clothes worn during the cleanup can be washed with hot water and detergent. Wash all contaminated clothing separate from uncontaminated clothes and linens. It is recommended to use a Laundromat to wash large quantities of clothes until your home waste-water system has been professionally inspected and serviced. It is very important to keep cloths and dish towels clean because bacteria can remain on the cloths and towels.

Dental Hygiene

Do not use contaminated water to brush your teeth. Brushing your teeth after a water-related emergency should only be done with clean, safe water. Bottled water is a good water source for brushing teeth.

Wound Care

Keeping wounds clean and covered is crucial during an emergency. Contaminated flood waters may contain fecal material, other organisms, or agricultural run-off, and wound exposure to this water can cause infections. If you have open cuts or sores, keep them as clean as possible by washing well with soap and clean, safe water to control infection. If a wound develops redness, swelling, or drainage, seek immediate medical attention.