



## Berrien County Health Department

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[www.bchdmi.org](http://www.bchdmi.org)

## **Floodwater and Your Health: Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What is in the floodwater and can it cause illness?**

Floodwater contains disease causing organisms – bacteria, viruses and parasites – that can make you ill. Even though there is some risk of disease transmission during contact with flood water and sewage, that risk is relatively small. Some of the flood-related illnesses could include: E. Coli, Salmonella, Cryptosporidium, Shigella, Giardia, or Campylobacter.

The most common flood-related illnesses are gastrointestinal infections (GI). Touching your face, mouth, and nose after having contact with floodwaters can elevate your risk for one of these illnesses. People most often get these illnesses when they get feces or stool in their mouth, often from dirty hands. GI symptoms include:

- stomach ache, cramps, and nausea
- fever
- vomiting
- diarrhea
- headache

If you have these GI symptoms and they last longer than two days, call your doctor. The incubation period for gastrointestinal infections (i.e., the time between initial contact with contamination and onset of illness) is usually one to three days.

### **What about tetanus?**

Tetanus is an infectious disease caused by bacteria in the soil that affects the nervous system and causes severe muscle spasms, known as lockjaw. Exposure to flood waters does **not** increase the risk of tetanus, but flood clean-up efforts come with a higher risk of wounds. Skin with cuts or sores can become infected or allow organisms, like tetanus, to enter if it comes into contact with dirty floodwater. It is recommended that cleanup workers should be sure that they are up-to-date with tetanus vaccination, ideally before starting cleanup activities. Adults should receive a tetanus booster every ten years.

Workers are recommended to keep any pre-existing cuts or sores clean, dry, and protected from floodwater. If injury occurs while cleaning up, immediately wash the area with soap and water, apply an antibiotic ointment to avoid infection and cover with clean gauze or bandages. If you have a deep wound that is exposed to floodwater or if you develop GI symptoms after working in a flood-affected area, get medical help and tell your doctor you've been in contact with floodwater.

### **How can I protect myself from illness while cleaning up after the flooding?**

The best way to protect yourself is to wear protective clothing including rubber boots, rubber gloves, a face mask, and goggles during cleanup of affected area. Anyone coming in contact with floodwaters should wash their hands – with soap and water – repeatedly during clean-up efforts. You should

always wash your hands with soap and water after handling garbage or debris contaminated with floodwater, after changing clothes worn to work in a flood affected area, before eating or preparing food, and before touching other people.

**What if...**

- If soap and clean water aren't readily available, you can use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer product to clean your hands.
- If you accidentally get drops of floodwater in your mouth, spit it out immediately and rinse and spit several times. If you swallow larger amounts, rinse and spit several times. If you develop GI symptoms, get medical attention as soon as possible and tell the doctor you've ingested floodwater.

**Do I need extra vaccinations/immunizations because of a flood?**

You do not need extra vaccinations/immunizations because of a flood. However, if you're going to be in contact with anything that's been contaminated by floodwater, ensure your immunizations are up-to-date, particularly for tetanus. Check with your doctor or the Berrien County Health Department if you have questions about your immunization records.

**Are there health risks if my sewer backs up during a flood?**

High water can increase the risk of sewer backups and basement flooding. Sewage contains micro-organisms that can make you sick. Don't enter your basement if water is near the level of electrical outlets or if there is live electrical equipment submerged. If you come into contact with water from sewer backup, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water.

**Additional Information**

[Berrien County Health Department Website](#)

[Centers for Disease Control & Prevention Floodwaters and Health Risks](#)

[Berrien County Health Department Facebook Page](#)

Residents are encouraged to call 2-1-1 for information on available resources.