

Harvey's health hazards will continue during cleanup

September 1 2017, by Dennis Thompson, Healthday Reporter



Texas National Guardsman carries Houston resident from flooding. National Guard photo: Lt. Zachary West

(HealthDay)—Hurricane Harvey is finally winding down, but residents and volunteers in the Houston area must remain on guard against health hazards that will continue during the cleanup effort, public health officials say.

Floodwater contamination will be the first and foremost problem people face as they return to their homes and businesses, said Cleveland Clinic infectious disease expert Dr. Frank Esper.

The [water](#) that entered their homes was loaded with bacteria from raw sewage, and likely also included chemicals and toxins from businesses and industrial sites, said Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association.

Esper warned that "even after the floodwaters have receded, the bacteria will remain a threat to [health](#). You need to make sure you are cleaning anything that could have been contaminated by these floodwaters."

Alcohol-based products, bleach or soap and water should be used to disinfect all surfaces and anything regularly handled by members of your family, Esper said. This includes utensils and children's toys.

Soaked homes also are at risk for mold. People with allergies, asthma and compromised immune systems in particular can be sickened if mold gains a foothold in a house following flooding, Esper said.

Oscar Alleyne is senior advisor for [public health](#) programs at the National Association of City and County Health Officials. He said that people cleaning out flooded homes should wear breathing masks to protect against mold.

To head off mold, people need to clean up and dry their homes within two days of the storm if possible, the University of Texas Health Science

Center at Houston recommends.

Air out the house by opening doors and windows, and placing fans or dehumidifiers in different rooms, the Health Science Center said. Soaked carpet and padding must be removed immediately, and sheetrock and insulation cut out at least three feet above the water line.

People also can speed the drying process by removing single planks of hardwood flooring every three to four feet. This speeds drying of the floor and foundation; after a few weeks, the now-dry planks can be put back in place.

A mix of bleach and water should be used to clean up any mold that already has formed, but be sure to use rubber gloves and open doors and windows first. The same solution can be applied to gutted exposed boards to prevent mold.

A previously flooded house itself poses a hazard for injury, Alleyne said.

"Even though a home may look fine, just going in you might be exposing yourself to crumbling walls or collapse," Alleyne said. "People sometimes just want to get home, but you need to be aware of what the potential dangers might be."

Benjamin suggested wearing hard hats, goggles, heavy work gloves and waterproof boots with steel toes. Watch your step to avoid coming down on an exposed nail, and be careful when operating equipment like chainsaws, he said.

Folks returning to a flood zone often will bring gas-powered equipment like camping cookstoves or generators that pose a carbon monoxide and fire hazard, Benjamin noted. Make sure any such equipment is placed in a well-ventilated area.

If power is out, be careful about the food left in a fridge or freezer, Benjamin said. It's easy for food to spoil quickly in summer heat, and eating it can make you sick.

The UT Health Science Center says food should be thrown away if it is:

- In a can that's open, damaged or bulging.
- Smells, looks or feels strange.
- Requires refrigeration but has been warmer than 40 degrees Fahrenheit for two or more hours.

Cans of food that came in contact with floodwater can be saved, but they need to be washed in a bleach/water solution.

Esper said that people also should throw away any medications that have been exposed to flood water, even if they are still in their pill bottle. "If they've been contaminated, you're putting them right down your throat," he said.

Flooded areas in Texas also will face a potential outbreak of Zika virus, since it is still mosquito season. *Aedes aegypti*, the mosquito most closely linked to Zika, prefers to breed in small pools of water near human dwellings.

Residents should try to remove any pools of standing water from their property as soon as possible, even if it's water puddled in a plant basket or outdoor toy.

"Zika is a concern, and they certainly do have exposures to the mosquito you worry most about," Esper said.

The Zika virus can lead to birth defects, such as microcephaly, which causes an abnormally small head and brain in babies. In addition, Zika

has been linked to a number of serious neurological conditions in adults.

More information: Frank Esper, M.D., infectious disease expert, Cleveland Clinic, Ohio; Georges Benjamin, M.D., executive director, American Public Health Association; Oscar Alleyne, DrPH, MPH, senior adviser, public health programs, National Association of City and County Health Officials

For more on Hurricane Harvey, visit the [Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\)](#).

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