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Flood Waters Pose Health Risks



Contact:

Amy Cormier
Amy.Cormier@flhealth.gov
863-462-5800

Okeechobee, FL — Storms can cause flooding. Skin contact with flood waters does not, by itself, pose a serious health risk. However, health hazards are a concern when waters are or become contaminated with bacteria and viruses.

The Florida Department of Health in Okeechobee County (DOH-Okeechobee) recommends the following precautions to prevent possible illness from flood waters:

- Basic hygiene is critical. Wash your hands with soap and either disinfected or boiled and cooled water, especially before preparing or eating food, after toilet use, after changing a soiled diaper, after participating in flood cleanup activities and after handling articles contaminated with flood water or sewage.
 - The preferred method of treatment is boiling tap water since disinfection does not kill certain parasites, such as *Cryptosporidium*. Boiling water also kills harmful bacteria and viruses. The process is complete once the water is held at a rolling boil for at least one minute. Allow the water to cool before use.
 - When boiling is not an option, disinfect tap water by adding eight drops of regular unscented household bleach (four to six percent strength), which is about 1/8 teaspoon or a dime sized puddle, per gallon of water. If a higher strength bleach is used (8.25 percent strength), only add seven drops of bleach. Mix the solution and let it stand for 30 minutes. If the water is cloudy after 30 minutes, repeat the procedure only one time.
- Avoid eating or drinking anything that has been contaminated with flood waters.
- Do not wade through standing water. If you do, wash your body and put on clean clothes.
- Avoid contact with flood waters, especially if you have open cuts or sores.
 - If you have any open cuts or sores and come in contact with flood waters, wash the area well with soap to prevent infection. If a wound develops redness, swelling, or drainage, seek immediate medical attention.
 - Residents who sustain lacerations and/or puncture wounds, and have not had a tetanus vaccination within the past five years will need a tetanus booster.

- If sewage backs up into your house, wear rubber boots and waterproof gloves during cleanup.
 - Absorbent household materials, such as wallcoverings, cloth, rugs and drywall, should be removed and discarded since they cannot be properly disinfected.
 - Hard-surfaced walls and floors, food contact surfaces, such as counter tops, refrigerators, and tables, and areas where children play should be cleaned with soap and water, followed by a disinfecting solution of 1/4 cup of bleach to one gallon of water.
 - All linens and clothing should be cleaned in hot water or dry cleaned, while carpeting should be steam cleaned if not replaced.
 - For larger items, air dry them in the sun, followed by spraying them with a disinfectant.

If your home is served by a septic tank and your plumbing is functioning slowly or sluggishly, you should:

- Conserve water as much as possible. If you use less water, you will increase the chance of not having any septic problems. This would include minimizing the use of your washing machine by going to a laundromat. Also, consider using a portable restroom.
- Do not have the septic tank pumped. Exceptionally high water tables might crush a septic tank that was pumped dry, or it could pop out of the ground. If the main problem is high ground water, pumping the tank will not solve that problem.
- If you cannot use your plumbing without creating a sanitary nuisance, such as sewage on top of the ground, consider renting a portable restroom for a temporary period, or moving to a new location until conditions improve.
- Do not have the septic tank and drainfield repaired until the ground water has receded below the bottom of the drainfield. Often, systems will function properly again when dry conditions return. Any repair must be permitted and inspected by DOH-Okeechobee County.

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