

Floods Happen: What You Can Do To Stay Safe

By Gloria Bucco

Flooding is a part of nature but, unlike tornadoes, lightning and hurricanes, we believe we can control flooding. We build dams and levees, we put our houses on stilts, we divert the natural flow of rivers, and yet flooding still happens. In fact, floods, especially flash floods, kill more people each year than hurricanes, tornadoes, wind storms or lightning.

According to the United Nations' and the Economic Commission for Europe's Guidelines on Sustainable Flood Prevention, rather than taking defensive actions against flood hazards, we must shift our emphasis to risk management and learn to live with floods. Governments should move to restore rivers' natural flood zones thereby reactivating the ability of natural wetlands and floodplains to retain water and reduce flood impacts.



It is also government's responsibility to provide education and timely information to its citizens concerning flood risks and preparedness. All who may suffer from the consequences of flooding should have access to the necessary information allowing them to take appropriate precautions that will limit flood damage.

Here are some suggestions and tips from a variety of sources about what you can do before, during and after a flood to keep your family, pets and belongings safe. (Next)

Before a Flood

There are many things you can do to prepare for a flood. First, check with your city's planning and zoning department to determine if your home or apartment is in a floodplain. Even if it isn't, you may want to heed these suggestions that can also come in handy for other emergencies.

The following can be done right now:

1. Know where the switches are and how to turn off your gas, electricity and water.
2. Prepare a flood kit of essential items including:

* Copies of home insurance documents.

- * A flashlight with spare batteries.
- * A battery-powered radio.
- * Candles and matches.
- * Warm, waterproof clothing and sleeping bags.
- * A first aid kit and prescription medicine.
- * Canned food and a can opener.
- * At least three gallons of water per person.
- * Baby food and baby care items.
- * Pet food.
- * A list of important phone numbers.

3. Check with city officials to see where evacuation centers will be and if pets will be allowed.
4. Put items of personal value such as photo albums, family videos and treasured mementos in a safe deposit box.
5. Think about what you would want to move to safety during a flood:
 - * Pets
 - * Cars
 - * Furniture and artwork
 - * Electrical equipment
6. Stop water from entering your home by:
 - * Putting plugs in sinks and baths, and weighing them down with a sandbag or another heavy object.
 - * Disconnecting any equipment that uses water such as washing machines and dishwashers.
7. Raise utilities such as your furnace, water heater, air conditioner and electric panel if they are in areas of your home that may be flooded.

During a Flood

If it has been raining hard for several hours or steadily raining for several days, you should be on the alert for flooding. Listen to local radio or television stations for flood information. Remember that a **Flood Watch** means *a flood is possible* in your area, and a **Flood Warning** means *flooding is already occurring* or will occur imminently.

Should a **Flood Watch** be issued, move furniture, valuables and your flood kit to higher floors of your home. Make sure your car's gas tank is full in case of an evacuation. If a **Flood Warning** is issued, listen to local radio and television for information and advice, and be ready to evacuate immediately. If the warning is for a **Flash Flood**, don't hesitate, evacuate immediately. You may have only seconds to escape. Move to higher ground away from rivers, streams, creeks and storm drains.

Here are some additional tips:

1. Move family and pets upstairs or to a high place with *a means of escape*.
2. Turn off gas, electricity and water supplies if flood water is about to enter your home and it is safe to do so. DO NOT touch sources of electricity when standing in flood water.
3. Keep listening to local radio for updates.
4. Flood water can rise quickly. Stay calm and reassure those around you.
5. Avoid walking through flood water.
6. Keep children, pets and vulnerable people away from flood water.
7. Stay out of flood water, especially if you can't see the bottom. Water over a road, no matter how deep, can hide washed-out pavement or sink holes.
8. Wash your hands thoroughly if you touch flood water.
9. Do not drive through flood water. About 60 percent of all flood deaths are people in vehicles that are swept away by moving water. If you drive into seemingly shallow water, you could land your car or truck in water that is really 2 or 3 feet deep. As little as 6 inches of moving water is enough to float a small car and carry it away, according to experts.

After a Flood

Should you and your family confront the hardship and suffering associated with a flood, it is important to know you can recover and move beyond these challenges. Here are some suggestions:

1. Find out if it is safe to return to your property.
2. Call your insurance company as soon as possible.
3. If you rent your property, contact your landlord and your contents insurance company as soon as possible.
4. Take photographs or video of all damage.
5. Mark water levels on the walls.
6. Always make sure you have approval from your insurance company before going ahead with any repairs.
7. Do not dispose of any item until you are told to do so.
8. Beware of hidden dangers in the flood water such as sharp objects, raised manhole covers, sewage and toxic chemicals. Always wear waterproof outerwear, gloves, boots and a face mask.
9. Determine if flood water has caused any structural damage to your property.
10. Get water out of your property using a pump and generator. Position the generator outdoors since they produce carbon monoxide fumes which can kill.
11. Only pump out water when flood levels outside your property start to be lower than inside. This reduces the risk of structural damage.

12. Shovel mud away evenly from both sides of a wall. This stops pressure building up on one side.
13. You can clean and disinfect your property using ordinary household products.
14. A garden hose is best for washing. Don't use high-pressure hoses as they can blast contaminated matter into the air.
15. If drying your property naturally, keep doors and windows open as much as possible. If using dehumidifiers, close external doors and windows.

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Preparing for a possible flood might take a little time but the investment will be well worth it should you and your family be faced with such a calamity. The most important things to remember are:

- * Determine if you live in a floodplain.
- * If you do live in a floodplain, get flood insurance.
 - * Prepare a flood kit.
- * Store your valuables in a safe place.
- * Know where your community's evacuation center is.
 - * Document all flood damage.

Gloria Bucco is a public information officer with the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources Floodplain Map Modernization Project.

Sources:

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