

From Washington State Department of Health

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Contacts:

[Mark Soltman](#), Office of Environmental Health and Safety 360-236-3366

[Deanna Whitman](#), Communications Office 360-236-4022

Rain-related health hazards a concern this time of year

OLYMPIA - Rain is a part of our way of life in Western Washington. However, long periods of heavy rain and flooding can lead to health hazards for you and your family. During the wet, winter season, the Department of Health recommends paying close attention to possible damage to the exterior of your home, indoor air quality and changes in your drinking water and septic systems.

Homes

Relentless rainfall can damage roofs, siding, windows and doors. Damage to a home's exterior increases the potential for water to enter attics and walls, leading to water damage and mold growth. Rising groundwater levels can cause water to enter basements and crawl-spaces, increasing the possibility of moisture-damage and mold growth. Mold growth can impact indoor air quality and cause problems for people who are sensitive to air contaminants or have asthma.

- Check attics, crawlspaces and basements for signs of moisture and water leaks.
- If you find wet areas or leaks, dry out your home quickly to reduce the possibility of moisture-related problems. Mold can start growing 24 to 48 hours after a leak starts.
- Try to find the source of the leak and fix it as soon as possible.
- Clean up any mold you find. If items (carpeting, upholstery, insulation material, etc.) that can hold water cannot be thoroughly cleaned and dried, they should be carefully removed and thrown away. Other items and surfaces should be cleaned with detergent and water.
- For foods that have gotten wet, the general rule is "When in doubt, throw it out!" This includes all packaged and unpackaged foods, fresh and frozen, which have been submerged or splashed with flood waters, or have not been properly refrigerated. Canned food should be cleaned with detergent and water, then disinfected in a weak bleach solution before opening.
- If your home floods and you don't have power, be cautious when using candles, appliances that are wet or portable generators – they could cause fire, electrical shock or carbon monoxide poisoning.

Drinking water

In flooded areas, surface water can enter and contaminate drinking water wells. If you are on a public water system, your water utility or local health agency will notify you of any potential problems. If you have your own well and your wellhead or the immediate area around your well is under water, you should assume your tap water is contaminated.

- If you are on a public water system, your water utility or local health agency will notify you of unsafe drinking water and provide directions for preventing exposure.
- If you think your well water could be contaminated, boil water (rolling boil) for three to five minutes and let it cool in a covered container. Boiling will kill disease-causing bacteria and parasites in contaminated water. Bottled water can also be used. Boiled or bottled water should be used for drinking, brushing teeth, washing dishes, preparing food and making ice.

Septic systems

Heavy rains can flood septic tanks and drain-fields. If your septic tank or drain-field is covered with water, do not use the system until the flooding recedes; this will prevent sewage backup in the house.

If any sewage has backed up into the house, keep everyone (especially children and pets) out of the area. Wear rubber gloves and boots while cleaning, and clean with a mild bleach solution before rinsing. Wash your hands thoroughly and wash clothes separately after completing the cleanup.

For specific information about these flood-related health risks and clean-up procedures, contact your local health department. More information about [floods](http://www.doh.wa.gov/Topics/floods.htm) (<http://www.doh.wa.gov/Topics/floods.htm>) and [mold](http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/ts/IAQ/Got_Mold.html) (http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/ts/IAQ/Got_Mold.html) is available on the agency's Web site.

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