

Infection Prevention and You



Preventing infections during a natural disaster

The past year brought many disasters across our globe, from wildfires to hurricanes, flooding to tornadoes. Natural disasters like these bring not only devastation, but also infection implications. It is important to remember to remain as safe and healthy as possible, and preventing infections is one way you can regain control during and after a disaster.

How to stay healthy during a disaster:

1. Wash your hands often. Be mindful of what your hands are touching. Hand hygiene is the best way to prevent the spread of infection. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers can quickly reduce the number of germs on hands in some situations, but sanitizers do not eliminate all types of germs.
2. Ensure food is stored, cooked, prepared, and served properly. If food items have been compromised due to flooding or power outages, do not risk your health. Throw them out. The CDC estimates that each year roughly 1 in 6 Americans (or 48 million people) get sick, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die of foodborne diseases.
3. Separate sick family members to decrease the risk of infections spreading. Shared close living space creates a home for germs, especially when people are coughing and sneezing.
4. Take care to prevent wounds/injuries when moving through a disaster area. Be careful of broken glass, nails, debris, and downed power lines. Make sure to wear protective clothing.
5. Immediately clean out all open wounds and cuts with soap and water. Keep wounds covered with clean, dry bandages large enough to cover the wound and contain any drainage. Get evaluated for a tetanus vaccine following the injury.
6. Use screens on dwellings, wear long pants, socks, and long-sleeved shirts, and use an EPA-registered insect repellent to prevent bug bites.
7. Keep skin dry, especially following floods. Avoid playing/wading in floodwater areas. Untreated, standing water may harbor bacteria that can cause extreme illness.
8. During clean-up activities, wear goggles or eye protection, an N-95 respirator, a long-sleeved shirt, protective gloves, and long pants

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Learn about the most common illnesses following disasters:

Gastroenteritis, which causes nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Many different germs, like viruses, bacteria or parasites can cause gastroenteritis. You can get this illness through:

- Eating/drinking foods contaminated with these germs;
- Touching dirty surfaces and then touching your own mouth, nose, or eyes;
- Close contact with a sick person; or
- Not washing hands after using the bathroom or changing a diaper and before preparing or eating food.

Skin issues, including wounds/injuries, bug bites, and skin infections. Exposure to many different germs (like bacteria in contaminated water), or parasites (like scabies or lice) in shelter environments can cause a variety of infections.

Respiratory illnesses, including fungal pneumonias, can develop:

- During water-related disasters, flooding may cause mold production in our homes. Clean-up activities may cause these respiratory germs to disperse, and we can become severely ill when we breathe in these germs.
- When we are forced to evacuate to shelters, we may be exposed to respiratory illnesses spread by droplets that come from coughing and sneezing, like influenza.

There are many resources to assist us in staying healthy and safe during and after a natural disaster.

- [Ready.gov](#) provides information on determining disaster risk, making a plan, building an emergency kit, and community considerations. There is also a special section for children that educates through age-appropriate activities and games.
- [The National Library of Medicine](#) and the [American Red Cross](#) offer free apps that provide instant access to basic CPR instructions, disaster checklists, shelters, and other helpful information.
- [FEMA](#) provides a full emergency preparedness guide, including checklists and tips.
- [APIC](#) provides multiple links to different agencies through its consumer website, *Infection Prevention & You*.

Additional resources

- APIC—Be prepared for natural disasters <https://apic.org/For-Consumers/Monthly-alerts-for-consumers/Article?id=be-prepared-for-natural-disasters>
- The CDC—Natural Disasters and Severe Weather <https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/disease/infectevac.html>
- The CDC—Prevent Illness After a Disaster <https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/disease/facts.html>
- The CDC—Health and Safety Concerns for All Disasters <https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/alldisasters.html>
- Ready.gov—Plan Ahead for Disasters www.ready.gov
- American Red Cross—Prepare for Emergencies <http://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies>
- The EPA—Find the Repellent that is Right for You <https://www.epa.gov/insect-repellents/find-repellent-right-you>

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