

State Officials Stress Importance of Health and Safety In Clean-Up Following Hurricane Matthew

RALEIGH – As residents begin cleaning from Hurricane Matthew, state officials urge North Carolinians to take extra precautions to protect their health and safety. Simple precautions can help prevent injuries and illnesses as well as pollution problems.

Injuries from falls are common after storms as residents climb ladders to repair roof or tree damage. Falls are among the leading causes of unintentional injury and death, according to state health officials. Injuries can be prevented by following proper precautions when using ladders, such as having someone else steady a ladder when climbing.

Clean up workers may be susceptible to heat-related health problems from overexertion in high temperatures. Take frequent breaks to cool down and drink bottled water or other fluids to prevent overheating. Opening windows or using fans can help reduce heat stress. Take care to avoid muscle strain when moving heavy items and debris. Flood-soaked items may weight much more than you anticipate.

If your home has been flooded, be careful when re-entering as flood waters may leave a coating of mud that makes floors and walkways slippery. If ceilings were damaged, wear a hard hat and safety glasses and avoid walking under sagging ceilings or bowed walls.

People whose homes were flooded during the hurricane should assume everything touched by flood water is contaminated and should be disinfected. Most clean up can be done with household cleaning products. The most important rule of clean-up work is to wash your hands thoroughly and often, wear rubber gloves and, if possible, waterproof boots.

If your home has been flooded:

- Do not try to remove flood-damaged materials that may contain asbestos. Buildings built before 1975 may have asbestos insulation and tape on the heating systems. Leave any suspected asbestos in place until it can be removed by trained asbestos professionals.
- Do not turn the power back on until the electrical system has been inspected by a qualified electrician. Standing on wet ground or floors can put you at risk for electrocution. If the pilot light on a natural gas furnace, hot-water heater or stove has gone out, have it re-lit by a professional.
- Furnishings and fixtures made from absorbent materials will need to be discarded if they have been in contact with flood water, including mattresses, upholstered furniture, carpets and padding, and books and paper products.
- Clothes, bedding and drapes can be washed in clean, hot water with a disinfectant, or dry-clean them. Throw them away if they are moldy or mildewed.
- If flood water soaked sheetrock, insulation or ceiling tiles, remove the items 30 inches above the water line. Paneling may be removed and saved, but wall cavities should be drained, cleaned, checked for molds, and dried out. Undamaged walls, hard surface floors and other surfaces should be cleaned and disinfected with a solution of ¼ cup of laundry bleach to a gallon of water.
- Clean, disinfect, and dry linoleum or tile floors. Floor tile and linoleum can contain asbestos and should not be disturbed. Chipping or grinding these materials may release asbestos

- Use a two-bucket method when cleaning. Put cleaning solution in one bucket and rinse water in the other. Replace rinse water frequently.

Mosquitoes increase in numbers after significant rain or flooding. In addition to being a nuisance, they also can carry a variety of dangerous diseases. Use insect repellent or wear long-sleeved clothing to protect yourself from mosquitoes and empty standing water out of birdbaths, tires, flowerpots and other containers to reduce mosquito breeding. Insect repellent will not work on stinging insects, like bees, wasps and hornets. These insects may have had their nests disturbed by storm damage and can become very aggressive trying to defend nest sites. Before beginning cleanup, survey the site to see if any stinging insects are hovering in the area and use commercial pesticide labeled for wasp and hornet use to get rid of them before entering.

Flood waters will move snakes and other wild animals out of their usual habitats and they may seek refuge in storm debris. Lift debris with sticks to check for hazards or wild animals before moving it. Domestic animals may become disoriented and agitated, posing a threat to people. If domestic animals need to be removed from an area, contact the county animal control office for help.

Avoid touching dead animals. Use gloves or a shovel to move dead animals, and then wash hands thoroughly. Contact your local health department about proper disposal of dead animals.

Check with local solid waste officials about proper disposal methods when cleaning up downed trees, branches, damaged structures and other debris. Waste management officials will be setting up approved disposal sites, and establishing procedures for picking up materials. Do not burn trees, limbs and other storm debris. Smoke from outdoor burning pollutes the air and is unhealthy to breathe. Compounding the problem, many residents are without power and air conditioning, so they need to leave windows open.

For more information on cleaning up after a flood, contact your local Emergency Management Office, local health department or Red Cross chapter. You can also get information from the following internet sites: www.dhhs.gov/hurricanes; www.fema.gov; and www.redcross.org.

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