

Precautions to Protect Health Following a Hurricane

PRINCE WILLIAM HEALTH DISTRICT RECOMMENDS PRECAUTIONS TO PROTECT HEALTH FOLLOWING HURRICANE

The Prince William Health District cautions residents impacted by the storm to take necessary precautions to protect their health.

People impacted by flooding or power failure from the storm should take precautions to maintain personal hygiene and avoid disease and injury. Following the recommended health precautions below can minimize the risk for disease resulting from the hurricane.

Drinking Water

Flood waters contain disease causing microorganisms. If water treatment plants are affected by flood waters, residents should heed instructions from local authorities to boil their water before drinking it and for use in preparing meals. People should not use any ice that is made with potentially contaminated water. Restoring water service could take some time in some areas.

Residents who are placed under a boil water notice should boil water at a rolling boil for one minute. This will kill any disease-causing microorganisms present in the water. The “flat” taste of boiled water can be improved by pouring it back and forth from one clean container into another (aeration), by allowing it to stand for a few hours, or by adding a pinch of salt for each quart of water boiled. Drinking bottled water is also an option for people whose water is contaminated.

If you can't boil water, add 8 drops of recently purchased, unscented liquid household bleach per gallon of clear water (double the number of drops for cloudy water), stir it well, and then let the water stand for 30 minutes before you use it. You also can use water-purifying tablets from your local pharmacy or sporting goods store. Note that using bleach or tablets may not kill some disease causing microorganisms.

People with compromised immune systems, including those who are on chemotherapy or are HIV positive, and living in the affected areas should be extremely cautious and consume only commercial bottled water.

In the event of flooding near a private well, assume that the well water is contaminated until it can be tested for safety.

Food Safety

In the event of a power outage, perishable foods including meats, dairy products and eggs that haven't been refrigerated for more than two hours should be discarded because they are no longer safe to consume. Foods that have been contaminated by flooding should also be discarded.

If your power comes back on after food in your freezer has already begun to thaw, use an appliance thermometer to check the temperature in your freezer. Food stored in the freezer at 40 °F or below is safe and may be refrozen. If a thermometer has not been kept in the freezer, check each package of food to determine the safety. Remember you can't rely on appearance or odor. If the food still contains ice crystals or is 40 °F or below, it is safe to refreeze.

Residents are advised to wash their hands after handling food to protect themselves and others from spreading food-borne illnesses.

Health department personnel will assist restaurants that may have been flooded so they can reopen as soon as possible.

Injuries & Disease

Rescue workers and citizens working on clean up are at risk for cuts and puncture wounds. Washing out cuts with soap and water is the first priority. Wounds should receive tetanus evaluation.

Protect against mosquito bites by wearing long, loose and light-colored clothing. Use insect repellent with the smallest percentage of DEET necessary for the length of time you are exposed to mosquitoes, but no more than 50% for adults and 30% for children under 12.

General Safety

People should use caution during clean up efforts to minimize the risk of injury. Residents and their children should avoid areas of flood water and stay away from any fallen or broken utility lines.

For more information, log onto the Virginia Department of Emergency Management Web site at www.vaemergency.com, or the Virginia Department of Health Web site at www.vdh.state.va.us.

HEALTH TIPS FOLLOWING A HURRICANE

- ❑ If you have questions about the health tips, call the Health Department at 703-792-6310 option 1.
- ❑ When the boil water advisory is lifted run your tap for a few minutes, empty all the ice from your icemaker, and re-wash any dishes you have used in soap and hot water. If your refrigerator has a cold-water dispenser, run it until it is empty and let it refill.
- ❑ Dispose of any perishable foods that have been warm for over 2 hours; fish, poultry, meat, eggs, milk, and leftovers are especially high risk. When in doubt, throw it out.
- ❑ Inspect the food in your freezer- if there are still ice crystals in the package it is probably safe to refreeze. If your freezer never got over 40 degrees Fahrenheit it is probably safe to refreeze. Otherwise, it is probably not safe. Remember, when in doubt, throw it out.
- ❑ CARBON MONOXIDE IS A SILENT KILLER! Don't bring generators into the house; don't use camp stoves and lanterns without ventilation; NEVER use stoves for heating. Any of these can cause deadly buildup of carbon monoxide.
- ❑ If water covered your well, you should disinfect it: call the Health Department at 703-792-6310 option 2 for advice. If you are concerned about your well water, we can provide you a list of testing services.
- ❑ If it is still warm enough for mosquitoes to breed, you will need to go out and re-empty all the containers, tarps, and other items around your house that create breeding sites. Remember to use repellent when outside.
- ❑ If you have medication that requires refrigeration but you lost power, check with the pharmacy on the label - they can advise you if it can still be used.