

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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CLEANING UP AFTER HOME FLOODING Important Health Considerations

(Culpeper) – The Rappahannock-Rapidan Health District wants residents to protect themselves and their families as they clean up after flooding and water seepage in their homes. Following heavy rains, it is not uncommon for mold to develop following water leakage, as flood waters provide ideal conditions for rapid mold growth. While mold and mildew do not affect everyone's health in the same way, many people are sensitive to molds and can experience a variety of ailments, from runny noses, stuffy sinuses, and lung irritation, to, in some cases, hives, welts and skin rashes.

Mold spores are invisible and can be inhaled. People at highest risk of becoming sick from mold exposure include young children, the elderly, pregnant women, people with asthma or other chronic lung diseases, and people with suppressed immune systems, such as with AIDS or under chemotherapy treatment.

It is most important to get rid of all household items which have been water soaked, such as soft furniture, mattresses, carpeting and anything else that can absorb water and cannot be adequately cleaned. This includes furniture made of pressboard or plywood. Items that can be thoroughly washed and dried can be kept. In general, porous items such as paper, cardboard boxes, wallboard, foam rubber and stuffing in furniture and toys can trap mold spores. Letting these items dry out will not remove mold; it will grow again anytime there is enough moisture in the air. Hard surface materials like glass, metal and plastic should be thoroughly washed in hot, soapy water and kept.

Cleaning up and sanitizing after water seepage is an important process that homeowners should pay close attention to. Walls and other hard surfaces should be scrubbed with a detergent solution. In some cases, flood waters may contain sewage elements or germs that must be disinfected properly. To properly disinfect, take the following steps:

Mix one quarter cup bleach per gallon of water and apply to surfaces where mold growth was visible before cleaning. This solution can be applied with a spray bottle, be sponged on, or applied by other methods. Using bleach straight from bottle is not recommended.

Allow the bleach solution to dry on the surface, typically ten minutes is recommended.

If you use another commercially available disinfectant, follow the label instructions. Keep the disinfectant on the treated material for the prescribed time before rinsing or drying. Collect any runoff of bleach solution with a wet/dry vacuum, sponge or mop.

Disinfectants are intended to be applied to thoroughly cleaned materials and are used to ensure that most microorganisms have been killed. Therefore, do not use disinfectants instead of, or before, cleaning surfaces and other soaked materials with soap or detergent.

Allow all disinfected items to dry thoroughly, otherwise, mold will return.

Handle bleach with caution. Bleach can irritate the eyes, nose, throat, and skin. Providing fresh air, ventilation, and protection from skin and eyes from contact with bleach are important steps to remember when cleaning with it.

It is important to continue to look for signs of moisture problems in your home or office after storms, as well as throughout the year, such as following heavy snowfalls, thawing, or with summertime humidity. Inspecting your home regularly for sources of indoor moisture and taking the proper steps to eliminate sources of water quickly is important for healthy occupants. Remember the following:

Stop the source of leak, flooding, or moisture. Investigate each time you notice water in the home.

Remove excess water with mops or wet vacuum.

Whenever possible, move wet items to dry and well-ventilated areas to expedite drying. Move rugs and pull up areas of wet carpet as soon as possible.

Open closet and cabinet doors and move furniture away from walls to increase air circulation.

Run portable fans.

Run dehumidifiers and air conditioners to lower humidity.

Do NOT use the home's central blower if flooding has occurred in it or any of the ducts.

Do NOT turn up the heat or use heaters in confined areas, as higher temperatures increase the rate of mold growth.

If water has soaked the inside walls, it may be necessary to open wall cavities, remove baseboards, and/or pry open wall paneling.

Spraying with a household disinfectant on fungi and mold will not remove the organisms and can exacerbate breathing problems.

Keep indoor surfaces as dry as possible. Keep home's relative humidity between 20-40 percent in winter and less than 60 percent the rest of the year.

Provide adequate ventilation, air circulation near cold surfaces, dehumidification or other methods to minimize the production of moisture in the home and control high humidity that frequently causes mold growth.

For more information on mold, or flood cleanup, log onto www.epa.gov/mold/moldresources.html, www.vdh.virginia.gov or for flood safety information, www.vdem.virginia.gov/recover/safety/index.htm. Questions? Call Environmental Health Manager, Charles E. Shepherd, 540/347-6363.

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