

INFORMATION on HEALTH RISKS

You may come in contact with biological hazards that could cause illness if you are exposed by breathing or swallowing the contaminants. Some contaminants like **bacteria or viruses** may be left indoors by floodwater, while **fungi (mold and mildew)** may grow indoors after the water has left.

1. **BACTERIA and VIRUSES**

Some of these microscopic organisms, particularly those from sewage, will be in floodwater and mud or sediment left by floodwater. If you accidentally swallow sediment or flood water that is contaminated, you might develop gastrointestinal (digestive tract) illness. Because there is so much water involved in flooding, the concentration of organisms will be diluted, and the risk of disease is small. You can nearly eliminate that risk by wearing **rubber gloves** while working, **not eating or smoking in the house**, and by **frequent hand washing**. This risk is similar indoors and outdoors.

If you get a **cut or puncture wound** that is exposed to flood water, there is some risk of tetanus and you should be vaccinated if you haven't had a tetanus vaccination or "booster" in the past 5 years. You should get the tetanus vaccine every 10 years whether there is a disaster or not. **No other vaccinations are recommended** because of flooding.

2. **FUNGI (Mold and Mildew)** *After you are assigned to a location, check with the regional supervisor about the following information:*

Many building materials, furniture and other items that stay wet for more than a few days will grow moldy. Mold colonies are the fuzzy or patchy white, green, brown, or black growths that you will see on wallboard, wood furniture and cabinets, clothing, wall studs, and almost any other surface.

Mold releases tiny spores and other cells into the air that can cause allergic illness like hay fever (coughing, sneezing, irritated eyes), asthma symptoms, or other respiratory illness that can be serious. Some molds may also produce toxins that could cause a number of other illnesses. We are exposed to mold every day, indoors and out, but mold contamination can be quite severe in a flooded building. **The risk is greatest for people with allergies, asthma, and the very old or very young.**

Exposure to mold will be greatest when you move or disturb materials that are moldy. Wet the mold with a soapy solution from a sprayer before you move it to reduce the release of spores. Do this even if the material is wet because the mold probably won't be wet. Remember that mold can still make you sick even after you have sprayed **disinfectants** to kill it.

If you enter a flooded building or one that has been flooded, wear a dust mask or respirator to reduce your exposure to mold. Look for a mask with "NIOSH" approval and an **N-95** rating. Both of these marks should be on the respirator and the container. Look for the masks at your hardware or home supply store if they are not available from your local health department.

Remember that the **masks are disposable** and should be thrown away at the end of the day. Read and follow instructions on the mask package.

The most important thing you can do to protect yourself is to use common sense and be aware of safety and health risks, and do not enter a building that is clearly unsafe.