

WORKING IN & CLEANING-UP FLOODED BUILDINGS



Unexpected events such as natural disasters, water main breaks, sewage back-ups and other events can cause buildings to flood. There are a number of questions that building occupants, clean-up workers and their representatives need to consider before going in.

What makes working in a flooded or previously flooded building potentially hazardous?

When returning to work in a building that has been affected by a flood, there is the potential for several hazards to be present including:

- Structural stability,
- Sewage back-up or flood water intrusion,
- Electrical or heating system damage from water intrusion,
- Water damage leading to mold growth, and
- Water damaged building materials containing lead and asbestos.

Before workers are allowed back into a building that has been impacted by a flood, the employer or the building owner are responsible to have assessed conditions in the building to determine that is safe for workers to enter without needing personal protective equipment or special training.

Is the building structurally sound and safe to enter?

Extreme events *can* cause buildings to be structurally unsafe to enter. Minor flooding typically does not structurally affect a building. In rare, worst-case scenario situations, buildings can be at risk of collapse. If you feel the building is unsafe to enter, don't go in BUT do not refuse to work and go home. Be part of the solution, speak with your local leadership and your supervisor to get a structural or civil engineer to verify if the building can be occupied. If your employer refuses and you feel that you are in imminent danger contact the nearest PESH office.

What if sewage has backed-up?

Sewage contains infectious micro-organisms. Workers should not be allowed into areas that have been impacted by either sewage or flood water unless they have been provided special training and personal protective equipment (PPE). If asked to work in an area that has been impacted by sewage or to handle materials which have not been cleaned & disinfected, request an alternative work space to perform work activities.

How does flooding affect the rest of the building?

Building electrical and heating ventilation & air conditioning (HVAC) systems *can* be adversely affected by flood water depending on the severity of the incident. Building electrical systems can be damaged by water that can lead to a fire; tripped breakers & internal power interruptions are a sign of an electrical problem. Electrical equipment near pooled water must be de-energized and locked-out prior to working in the area. The HVAC systems can be clogged with debris, fans shorted out, mold growth on filters & inside ducts. These problems should be brought to management's attention immediately, and the affected system should be isolated & dealt with by trained personnel only.

Should I be worried about mold?

It typically takes two to three days after a water damage event for mold growth to start. Flooded buildings should be pumped out, disinfected and dried as soon as possible to prevent mold growth. HVAC systems should be shut down and isolated. Workers required to clean-up mold must be properly trained and equipped.

What other hazards should I be worried about?

If you work in a building that was constructed before 1980, that building could have materials that contain either lead or asbestos. Asbestos containing building materials (ACM) can be damaged in floods and potentially release hazardous fibers. Strict laws require building owners to determine the location and quantity of ACM in their buildings. Properly trained and equipped personnel should ensure that any building ACM has not been damaged before workers re-occupy the building.

I have been asked to be part of the building clean up, what should I do?

Flood clean-up workers need training and protective equipment. If you are asked to participate see the information sheet for CSEA members responding to flood affected areas to know what protective clothing and training that should be provided by your employer. Contact your authorized representatives to discuss any questions or concerns. Notify your supervisor if you have any health or medical conditions, such as high blood pressure; heart or respiratory conditions; or insect, plant or mold allergies as they may affect your ability to do the work.