



University of Wisconsin Extension

Cooperative Extension

Green County UW-Extension  
N3150B Highway 81  
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June 13, 2008

## CLEANING HOUSEHOLD ITEMS FLOODED IN BASEMENTS

Whether it was a few inches or a few feet, when the water recedes from your basement, you're left with the job of assessing the damages and planning for clean-up. Reclaiming some items, such as appliances, may require the help of a professional.

Your options will depend on the source of flooding. If floodwater consisted of clean basement seepage or lawn runoff, drying and cleaning may be an easy decision. But if sewage-contaminated floodwater has entered your basement, there may be some items you need to discard.

### **Carpets and rugs:**

- Wall-to-wall carpeting, large area rugs, and rugs with foam backings should be discarded if flooded with contaminated water. Except for valuable rugs, the time and expense of professional cleaning is not worth the effort or health risk.
- Throw rugs usually can be cleaned adequately in a washing machine.
- Wall-to-wall carpeting soaked by clean rainwater can be salvaged through professional or steam cleaning. If possible, remove the carpeting from the basement to clean it since cleaning adds even more moisture to an already wet area. Carpet padding is nearly impossible to clean and should be replaced.
- If you can't remove the carpeting, dry it as quickly as possible to minimize growth of mildew. Use a wet/dry vacuum if possible. A dehumidifier can help remove moisture from the air, but be sure to keep window closed. If weather permits, you can also open windows and set up fans to remove moisture.
- When the carpet is dry, vacuum, shampoo, and repeat the drying process. Keep in mind that most modern carpet is made of nylon and should not be treated with bleach.
- If a musty smell remains, sprinkle baking soda over the dry carpet, working it in with a broom or sponge mop. Leave the baking soda in over night, then thoroughly vacuum the rug to remove the soda.

**Appliances:** If any appliances came in contact with floodwater, they should not be operated until they have been checked by a professional service person. They need to check out wiring and fixtures and be sure the motor is in safe working order. They may need to recondition or replace damaged electrical motors or apply rust inhibitor to all metal parts. Even if an appliance has not come in contact with floodwaters, rust can develop from dampness in the air.

- Refrigerators/Freezers:
  - If water has seeped in, all shelves, crispers, and ice trays should be removed, washed with water and detergent, and rinsed with a disinfectant solution of  $\frac{3}{4}$  cups bleach to one gallon of water. Wash the interior of the fridge with hot water and baking soda, followed by a disinfectant solution. Wash the outside with a mild detergent and hot water.

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- After washing, leave the door open for about 15 minutes for air circulation.
- If odor remains, place charcoal in an open metal container inside the closed refrigerator or use a commercial deodorizer.
- Laundry Equipment:
  - Unplug the dryer and wipe the drum and door with a cloth dipped in disinfecting solution. Rinse with a cloth dipped in clear water.
  - Leave the dryer door open until all parts are thoroughly dry – preferably overnight.
  - Pour a disinfectant, such as chlorine bleach, into the empty washing machine. Then complete a 15-minute cycle at the “hot” water setting.

**Furniture:** Depending on the amount of water damage, deciding which furniture to save may be more of a personal issue, especially if you have antiques or sentimental pieces.

- Don't try to force open swollen wooden doors and drawers. If possible, take off the back of the piece of furniture to let air circulate instead. You'll probably be able to open the drawers after they dry.
- Solid wood furniture can usually be restored, unless damage is severe. It probably will need to be cleaned, dried, and reglued. Turpentine or wood alcohol applied with a cottonball may remove white mildew spots on wood. Follow with a cream wood restorer with lanolin.
- Wood veneered furniture is usually not worth the cost and effort of repair, unless it is very valuable. If veneer is loose in just a few places, you may be able to glue it back in place.
- Upholstered furniture soaks up contaminants from floodwaters and should be cleaned by a professional if it is worth saving. Usually, flood-soaked upholstered pieces should be thrown away.

**Books and Papers:** If important documents or books have been damaged by floodwater, it may be possible to dry out some of these items. Even if papers appear to have dried successfully, however, they may disintegrate rapidly because of substances in the floodwater. Photocopy valuable papers as soon as they're dried as a precaution.

- Dry papers and books slowly for best results. If you don't have time to clean and dry them immediately, consider putting them in the freezer to prevent mildewing. Place wax paper between layers of paper bundles or books so they can be separated easily when removed.
- Wipe book covers with a solution of one part rubbing or denatured alcohol to one part water. Wipe vinyl and leather book covers with a light coating of petroleum jelly.
- If papers and books are very damp, sprinkle pages with corn starch or talcum powder to absorb moisture. Leave powder for several hours, then brush off.
- Place books on end with leaves separated. When partially dry, pile and press books to keep pages from crumpling. Alternate drying and pressing until books feel thoroughly dry. Use a fan to help speed drying. For valuable books that are nearly dry, consider pressing the pages with an electric iron set on low. When books are thoroughly dry, close them and use C-clamps to help them retain their shape.

For additional information on drying out after a flood, contact the Green County UW-Extension office at 328-9440.