

Flood Safety – Dust, Asbestos and Mould

Dust is generally an irritant that affects a person's breathing.

Dust is made up of non-inhalable (coarse), inhalable (fine), and respirable (very fine) particles.

Coarse dust particles only reach the inside of the nose, mouth or throat.

Smaller or fine particles may get much deeper into sensitive regions of the respiratory tract.

In general, the risk from dust arising from clean-up activities does not usually develop into disease, however, people should be aware that pathogenic (disease causing) organisms may still be viable within the dust and if concerned that you are exposed to a lot of dust or are uncomfortable during the clean-up, **then the use of protective equipment is an option for you.**

Common symptoms of exposure to dust are:

- Irritation of the eyes and upper airways leading to coughing, sneezing, hayfever symptoms
- Triggering of allergic reactions and asthma attacks
- Development of more serious breathing difficulties for those with underlying respiratory conditions such as asthma, bronchitis or emphysema

People with cardiovascular disease or diabetes may be at an increased risk of complications if highly exposed to dust.

It is up to individuals to gauge their level of exposure and to take the following precautions:

- Avoid outdoor activity as much as possible
- Cover your nose and mouth with a P2 mask, available from hardware stores
- Avoid being too vigorous during clean-up activities.
- Ensure good personal hygiene after working in and around flood affected areas

ASBESTOS

Asbestos is a concern because when it is broken up it may create airborne asbestos dust particles.

Many properties built or renovated before 1987 are likely to contain asbestos, usually in the form of roof and wall sheeting.

Generally, the asbestos will remain trapped in the cement matrix (bonded asbestos) and cause no harm. When it is broken up or worked on with power tools such as drills, grinders, saws etc, small fibres of asbestos will be released into the air. It is the airborne fibres that can cause illness when inhaled.

Precautions

- Spray with water
- Cover with plastic sheeting
- Prevent access by children and pets
- Cover children's toys
- Use wet clean up procedures rather than dry sweeping or vacuuming
- Stay away from confined spaces containing loose asbestos materials

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It is important to recognise asbestos and deal with it in accordance with NSW Workcover guidelines and prepare the material for disposal in accordance with your Council's and Environment Protection Authority's requirements. Details are available on the appropriate websites or call your Council office for advice.

If handling asbestos products, you should wear the specified personal protective equipment.

MOULD

Following the lengthy rain period and recent flooding, many homes will be affected by mould indoors and under floors where wet and moist conditions persist.

Mould is a fungal growth. It grows in homes under the right conditions of dampness, darkness & poor ventilation.

Mould may cause the following health effects:

- Allergic responses leading to running and blocked nose, irritation of the eyes and skin and sometimes wheezing
- Very rarely people may develop a more severe mould infection
- Inhalation of mould spore may also trigger an asthma attack.

Who is at greater risk

- People with asthma, allergies or other breathing problems
- People with weakened immune systems, such as HIV and cancer patients
- Organ transplant patients
- People with emphysema or Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

Mould can be reduced by:

- Reducing humidity where possible
- Maintaining proper ventilation - turn on fans and open windows,
- clean and dry water damaged carpets and building materials, and
- discard materials that cannot be cleaned and dried completely

Mould can be removed by:

- routinely cleaning surfaces using mild detergent or vinegar diluted in water (4 parts vinegar to 1-part water)
- To make up a 10 litre bucket of disinfectant, fill the bucket with water and then add one of the following
50mls (quarter of a cup) of 4% chlorine (household bleach)
OR
8-16mls (desert spoon) of 12.5% chlorine (liquid pool chlorine)
Tea Tree oil is also effective - 3% solution or (2 teaspoons in a spray bottle with 2 cups of water)
- It is recommended PVC or nitrile rubber gloves, safety goggles, masks and safety shoes be used in a well ventilated room when bleach is used.
- Always allow cleaning solution to remain on surface being treated for at least 20 minutes before rinsing off.
- Ensure the surface is dried completely once cleaned
- Absorbent material, such as carpet, may need to be professionally cleaned or replaced

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When persons return to homes or buildings after a flood, they should take the following steps:

- Clean up and dry out the building quickly. Open doors and windows and use fans or dehumidifiers to dry out the building.
- Remove all porous items that have been wet for >48 hours and that cannot be thoroughly cleaned and dried. These items can remain a source of mould growth and should be removed from the home or building. Porous, non-cleanable items include carpeting and carpet padding, upholstery, wallpaper, drywall, ceiling tiles, insulation material, some clothing, leather, paper, some wood and wood products, and food. Removal and cleaning are important because even dead mould can cause allergic reactions.
- Clean wet items and surfaces with detergent and water to prevent mould growth.
- Temporarily store damaged or discarded items outside the home or building until insurance claims can be processed.