Health advice -
General information following floods

Health Protection Agency

This leaflet provides important health advice and some basic precautions to keep you and your family safe in the event of floods. The latest alerts and general flooding advice are provided by the Environment Agency, see website www.environment-agency.gov.uk

Main health risks

Drowning is the clearest and most immediate health risk during floods. Serious injury can also be caused by falling into fast-flowing water or from hidden dangers under the water, such as missing manhole covers.

There is also a serious danger posed by carbon monoxide fumes from the use of generators and other fuel-powered equipment brought indoors to dry out buildings.

Do not underestimate the stress and strain of being flooded and cleaning up after floods. Take time to consider your and your family's mental health and well-being. Do not overdo it when cleaning up, and remember that tiredness, difficulty sleeping and anxiety are normal in these circumstances.

The risk from bugs in the water

Infection problems arising from floods in this country are rare. Usually any harmful bugs in floodwater become very diluted and present a low risk, but there are a few precautions we can take:

- Wherever possible, try to avoid coming into direct contact with floodwater. If you have to go into the water, wear waterproof gloves and rubber boots and remember to be careful of potentially concealed hazards
- Wash your hands – this is the most important way to get rid of harmful bugs. Use warm, clean water and soap, then rinse and dry your hands after going to the toilet, before eating or preparing food, or after being in contact with floodwater, sewage or with items that have been in the water. Use cold water if there is no warm water, or wet wipes if there is no water at all
- Keep any open cuts or sores clean and prevent them being exposed to floodwater. Wear waterproof plasters.

If you feel unwell

If you feel unwell this does not necessarily mean that you are suffering from any infection. If you are concerned, then call NHS Direct on 0845 4647 or visit your family doctor.

You should contact your doctor if you become ill after accidentally swallowing contaminated water or mud, particularly if you develop diarrhoea, fever or abdominal pain within 10 days of being in contact with floodwater or sewage.

Keeping children safe

- Do not allow children to play in floodwater areas – they won't know how deep the water is and there may be hidden dangers
- Wash children's hands frequently and always before meals
- Parents with infants that are unwell with diarrhoea and vomiting should seek medical advice
- Do not let young children play on affected paved or concreted areas until they have been cleaned. Sunlight and soil help destroy harmful bacteria so it is usually safe for children to play on grass a week or so after the floodwater has gone.
- Wash floodwater-contaminated toys with hot water and detergent. Soft toys can be put in a hot (60°C) machine wash.

Food and floods

The Food Standards Agency advises people not to eat any food that has been touched or covered by floodwater or sewage. Do not eat any produce grown on an allotment or garden that has been flooded, unless it has been cooked.

Wash your hands before and after preparing food. Using clean water, detergent, then a normal kitchen disinfectant, clean and disinfect work surfaces, plates, pans, cutlery, and plastic/glass chopping boards, before preparing food. If you have a working dishwasher, this is best for smaller items.

Throw away any food in your fridge if it has not been working for a few hours. Do the same with any freezer food containing meat, fish or dairy, if your freezer has stopped working. You will also need to discard any food that you would eat frozen, such as ice cream.

Your local health services

If you want to check that your scheduled appointment is unaffected (eg. GP, outpatient, inpatient at local hospital), use the usual local telephone numbers for your health services. In more severe circumstances the local NHS primary care trust may be issuing updates on access to local NHS services and NHS Direct (0845 4647) is also a good source of local health service information.

For more information visit the following websites:

Health Protection Agency – www.hpa.org.uk

Environment Agency – www.environment-agency.gov.uk

Food Standards Agency – www.foodstandards.gov.uk