



**Cooperative Extension Service**  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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## Flood Clean-Up: General Guides for Clothes and Household Textiles

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Floodwaters that have passed through homes and other buildings generate health and safety concerns. Many clothing items and household articles that have been submerged may not be safe or worth the time, effort and money to try to make useable again and should be discarded. Other items may be salvageable. Remember, it is best to assume that anything touched by floodwater is contaminated.

### **Protect Yourself**

When you can safely return to your home or business to assess damage, wear clothing that will protect you from injury and protect your health. Wear rubber or other water-resistant gloves and boots with long pants tucked into the boots. These items will provide protection when walking through debris-littered areas and when handling items inside the structure. Mold spores will be present in the air inside the structure. Wear a face mask to cover your nose and mouth to protect against inhalation of the mold spores.

### **What to Consider Discarding**

Almost any textile items, such as carpeting, mattresses, pillows, upholstered furniture, stuffed toys/animals or clothing, that have been submerged for weeks in floodwater should probably be discarded. The contaminants, odors and organic soils are so imbedded in the fabrics and fillers or stuffing that is doubtful that any cleaning products and efforts will completely clean the items. The amount of soil in or on an item can make a disinfectant less effective. If all soil and contaminants are not removed, odors and possible health risks will remain.

### **What to Save**

Textile items that have been elevated in the house or building out of the reach of floodwaters may be salvageable. However, the combination of heat and humidity may have created the perfect conditions for mildew growth. Use products and procedures to remove mildew that will not further damage the specific fiber or fabric in the textile item. Keep in mind that all cleaning products are not suitable for all uses. For example, a mildewcide product intended to remove mildew from wood is not formulated for use on textiles. Do not use products that are not intended to be used in the home for mildew removal, such as toxic products intended for outdoor use where human contact is not a constant concern. If a textile item or furniture piece is an antique or very valuable, you may wish to invest the time, money and energy required to save the item. In many cases, this is the time to consult with a professional cleaner or restorer of textiles and furniture.

### **Cleaning Salvageable, Washable Clothing and Household Textiles**

If any washable clothing and household textiles are uncontaminated and salvageable, separate them from nonwashables. Be sure to wear protective gloves while handling these items. Take all of these articles outdoors. If any are dry, shake out dried mud and dirt. Hose off any wet, muddy items. Hang items on a line or spread them out to dry. Air and sun will help the fabrics dry quickly and will help stop mildew growth. Launder items as soon as possible. If your laundry equipment has been in the floodwater and is not safe to use, use a public laundromat or equipment at the home of a relative or friend. Laundromats have over-sized washers and dryers that will handle larger items, such as throw

rugs, blankets and bedspreads. If clothes and other items need to be pre-soaked to remove more mud before machine washing, soak in a container of cold water. Do not pre-soak in the washer. Separate soiled articles into light-colored, dark-colored and hand-laundered loads. Follow these general guides for machine laundering articles.

1. Be sure water supply is clean and safe. Use hot water, the recommended amount of heavy duty laundry detergent and 1/2 cup of water conditioner. Do not overload the washer.
2. Use a disinfectant in wash water to kill bacteria, mildew and other microorganisms. Remember the word "disinfectant" and an EPA registration number must appear on a cleaning product label if the product meets the standards required as an effective disinfectant. If safe for fibers and dyes of fabric, use chlorine bleach. (Note: If there is a large amount of iron in soil deposits or water, chlorine bleach can cause rust stains to appear on fabrics.) Put 1 cup liquid chlorine bleach which is labeled as a disinfectant in the wash water before laundry is put in a top-loading washer or use the automatic bleach dispenser on the washer. For front-load washers, use 1/2 cup of chlorine bleach. If chlorine bleach is not safe to use with some of the textile items, use another type of disinfectant, such as one of the pine oils or other types of disinfectant products which carry a manufacturer label statement that the product is safe to use for laundering textile items. Never mix bleach with ammonia or ammonia-based cleaning products. Mixing this combination will create toxic fumes. It is important to have good ventilation and air circulation when using any cleaning product.

3. Use the regular wash cycle and maximum water level. For permanent press or synthetic fabrics, use the permanent press cycle.
4. Heat kills germs, so tumble dry items on regular drying cycle. If drying in automatic dryer may cause excess shrinkage, hang these items in the sun to dry.
5. Use appropriate detergents and safe disinfectants for items that require hand laundering.
6. Ironing also helps kill germs on cellulose-based (cotton, linen, ramie, rayon) fabrics and blends of cellulose fibers with synthetic fibers (polyester/cotton.) Steam pressing will help kill germs in items that are air dried away from the sun.

### **Cleaning Salvageable, Non-Washable Clothes and Household Textiles**

If the care label says "Dry Clean Only", shake out loose dirt and take the items to a professional drycleaner. The solvents used in drycleaning, the flushing action and the steam used in the finished process are effective in reducing bacteria to safe levels. Coin-operated dry cleaning units do not provide for use of the steam finishing process and should not be used to clean flood-soiled clothes.

### **Storage of Clean Textile Items**

Dry, clean clothing and other textile articles do not support mildew growth. However, if the storage area where you place your clean items is not also dry and clean, the textile items may gather moisture from the air and mildew can start to grow. So, if the closets, drawers and other storage areas in the flooded house are damp and humidity is high, do not store them there until the storage areas have completely dried.