
Emergencies - floods

Summary

- Floods cost Australians around \$400 million every year.
 - Southern Australia typically experiences flooding during winter and spring.
 - Contact your local council to find out the flood history of your neighbourhood.
 - Your family should devise an emergency plan in case of flood.
 - Don't try to walk, swim or drive through flood waters.
 - Listen to ABC local radio for updates.
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Floods cost Australians around \$400 million each year. Southern Australia typically experiences flooding during winter and spring. The Bureau of Meteorology, in consultation with other services, such as water authorities, the State Emergency Services and local councils, issues flood warnings that help people prepare or evacuate (temporarily leave their homes due to safety risks).

The main flood types affecting Australia include flooding of rivers or drainage systems due to exceptionally heavy rains, and storm surges caused by tropical cyclones. Flash flooding carries the greatest risk of injury or death, since the sudden swell of water catches people by surprise.

Find out your area's flood history

Contact your local council to find out the flood history of your neighbourhood. This will give you an idea of the risk of flooding in your area. Also find out how high your nearest watercourse (such as a river) must rise before floods threaten your home, and become familiar with the flood evacuation plans for your area.

Have a household emergency plan

You and your family should work out an emergency plan in case of flood. The plan should include:

- Have an emergency kit already packed – including a battery-operated radio and torches, spare batteries, canned food, bottled water, a first aid kit, regular medication, extra warm clothing, disposable gloves and plastic bags, and important documents, such as insurance policies and personal identification (birth certificate, driver licence or passport) and other items, such as a hard drive with photos and documents. Keep these items in waterproof containers or bags.
- Your radio should be portable and battery operated. Consider having a spare, in case the first radio gets wet or damaged.
- Know where the power, gas and water mains switches or taps are located, and learn how and when to turn them off.
- Establish a safe household meeting point in case of a sudden emergency.
- In the event that you decide to leave your property, know the safest route out to safety.
- Have a contact person for you or your family to call to let them know that you are safe.
- Discuss how you will care for your pets or other animals on your property.

What to do in a flood

When there is a flood alert in your area, there are things you can do to prepare. Suggestions include:

- Move items you want to save to the highest point in your house (such as the top floor, attic or 'crawl space' – or even stacked on the kitchen table).
- Keep up to date with developments by listening to your local ABC radio station. The ABC is Victoria's emergency services broadcaster during an emergency and should have the latest information.

- Switch off your gas and electricity.
- Open the doors of heavy and airtight items (such as refrigerators) to allow the water in, otherwise they could be tipped over and damaged.
- If you plan to leave your home, then do so before the floodwaters rise. Don't forget to pack dry clothes, regular medication, important valuables and your mobile phone (and charger).
- Inform neighbours and authorities, such as local police, of your intention to leave.
- Know the safest route from your property to a safer area by checking the [VicTraffic road closures website](#).
- Listen to your local ABC radio or contact the SES on 132 500 to locate your nearest relief centre.
- Take your pets with you if you decide to leave your property.
- Flood-proofing your home (with sandbags or similar) is hard, backbreaking work – so ask friends and neighbours for help, and allow plenty of time to complete this task.

Don't take unnecessary risks in a flood

People risk their lives by trying to travel through floodwaters. The cause of injury or death may include drowning, or sustaining heavy blows to the body and head while being swept along by the current.

To possibly save your life, remember:

- Floodwaters are often deeper than they look. Don't try to walk, swim or drive through floodwaters, especially if you can see a current.
- Good swimming skills will not always keep you safe. Swirling objects in the floodwaters, such as tree branches, could strike you.
- If your vehicle is overcome by water, leave it and move to higher ground immediately.
- Try to keep dry. Being wet and cold for any length of time could lead to hypothermia – a dangerous condition triggered by lower than normal body temperature.
- Downed power lines pose a risk of electrocution.

Safety suggestions immediately after a flood

Once the waters recede, suggestions include:

- Keep listening to ABC local radio for updates.
- Don't use any gas or electrical appliances before having them checked first.
- Local water supplies may be contaminated, so boil tap water until local water authorities tell you that the water is safe to drink.
- Avoid any areas that remain flooded.

When returning to your home after a flood, take precautions to reduce the possibility of illness, disease or injury.

Before going onto your property, consider:

- Damaged gas or electricity supplies – these hazards need to be declared safe by a qualified electrician or plumber.
- The structural integrity of your home and structures may be affected – this needs to be declared safe by a qualified building surveyor.
- Wild animals, including rodents, snakes or spiders, may be trapped in and around your home.
- Cuts from broken glass and debris may be a problem – wear sturdy waterproof boots, and rubber or leather gloves.
- Food may be contaminated by the floodwater, or spoiled due to power failure.
- Drinking water may be contaminated – do not drink any water unless you know it is safe (bottled, boiled or disinfected).
- Wading or playing in floodwater is hazardous due to the risk of drowning and potential skin infection through open wounds coming into contact with the floodwater.
- Mosquitoes can breed rapidly and become a nuisance – cover skin with long sleeves and pants, and use an insect repellent.

- If possible, use flashlights or other battery-operated lights instead of candles. Do not smoke or use matches, lighters or other open flames, in case gas has collected inside.
- Pets and other animals may have died and need to be removed. For advice on safe disposal of animals, speak to your local council or veterinarian.
- Flooding can cause excessive mould growth, which must be cleaned up before moving back to your home.
- Flooding may cause sewage to overflow inside your home. Contaminated areas must be cleaned and disinfected. Keep children and pets away until the clean-up is completed.
- Buildings may contain asbestos-containing material. Take all necessary precautions when handling asbestos-containing debris.

Personal hygiene is essential during floods

A number of infectious diseases, including gastrointestinal infections and hepatitis A, can spread through contact with contaminated surfaces. The likelihood of illness increases when floodwater contains faecal material (poo) from overflowing sewage systems, agricultural or industrial wastes.

Never use contaminated water to wash dishes, brush your teeth, wash your hands, wash and prepare food, make ice or make baby formula.

Always wash your hands with soap and safe water (that has been boiled or disinfected):

- before preparing or eating food
- going to the toilet
- after cleanup activities
- after handling articles contaminated with
- floodwater or sewage.

If boiled or disinfected water is not available, you can use alcohol-based products to disinfect your hands.

If you have any open cut or sore that has been exposed to floodwater:

- Keep it as clean as possible by washing with soap and covering with a plaster.
- Contact a doctor for further treatment advice (such as a tetanus shot).
- If redness, swelling or discharge occurs, seek immediate medical attention.

Parents need to help their children avoid waterborne illness. Tips include:

- Do not allow children to play in floodwater areas.
- Wash children's hands frequently (always before meals).
- Do not allow children to play with flood-damaged toys contaminated with floodwater, until they have been disinfected.

Food supplies may be contaminated

Floodwaters can affect food through direct contact or, indirectly, by causing interruptions to power supplies, affecting local refrigeration.

Throw away:

- food that has come into direct contact with floodwater
- any food that has an unusual odour, colour or texture
- perishable foods (including meat, poultry, fish, eggs or leftovers) that have been left at above 5 °C for more than four hours
- canned food if the can is open, bulging or damaged
- food containers with screw caps, snap-lids, crimped caps (soft drink bottles), twist caps, flip-top lids and home-canned foods.

For cleaning cans that are still sealed, not bulging and intact, but have come into contact with floodwater:

- Remove the labels.
- Wash the cans.
- Dip them in a solution of 1.5 cups of household chlorine bleach mixed into 10 litres of water (a household bucket) for two minutes.
- Re-label the cans with a waterproof marker pen.

If the power is on, refreeze or cook food that has thawed but contains ice crystals and is below 4 °C.

If the power is off, store food safely by:

- keeping the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible.
- adding block or dry ice to your refrigerator if the power is likely to be off for longer than four hours. Wear gloves when handling ice.

Preventing illness from contaminated water

Local water authorities will tell you if tap water is safe or unsafe to drink, use for cooking, cleaning or bathing. If the water is not safe, use bottled, boiled or disinfected water. An above ground rainwater tank that has not been inundated with floodwaters or damaged should be safe for continued use.

Correctly boil water by:

- Keeping it at a rolling boil for one minute to make sure bacteria are killed.
- If you suspect the water is contaminated with chemicals, boiling will not make it safe to drink – only use bottled water.

Correctly disinfect water for drinking by:

- adding $\frac{3}{4}$ of a teaspoon (4 ml) of non-scented chlorine bleach into a clean household bucket containing 10 litres of water
- stirring the water well, and letting it stand for 30 minutes before using it.

For infants:

- Use only pre-prepared canned baby food.
- Make up powdered formulas with bottled water.

Clean children's toys that have come into contact with floodwater by:

- soaking them in a solution of 1.5 cups of household bleach in 10 litres of cold water (a household bucket) for two minutes. Rinse in clean water.
- letting toys air dry after cleaning. Children and elderly people are particularly at risk from dehydration. Ensure they drink plenty of safe (bottled) water until the drinking water supply is declared safe.

Managing sewage overflow inside your home

Sewage contains harmful bacteria and viruses. Keep children and pets away from sewage affected areas until it has been cleaned up.

Appropriate clean up procedures include:

- Use rubber gloves and boots, and eye protection.
- Remove and discard contaminated household materials that cannot be cleaned or disinfected, such as carpet and children's soft toys.
- Clean and disinfect all contaminated areas with hot water and detergent, then disinfect.
- Do not use high-pressure water jets on asbestos-containing materials.
- Pay special attention to cooking utensils, work surfaces and other surfaces such as floors and walls.
- For utensils, dip them in a solution of 1.5 cups of household chlorine bleach in 10 litres of cold water (a household bucket) for two minutes. Rinse in clean water.
- To disinfect hard surfaces, use the same solution and leave wet for 10 minutes. Rinse off with clean water.

- Disinfect cleaning mops, brooms and brushes with bleach solution.
- Clean and dry dirty footwear, and wash your clothes separately after clean up.
- Wash your hands and any affected parts of your body with soap and water.
- For further advice, contact your local water authority or the Environmental Health section of your local council.

Cleaning up after a flood

When cleaning up after a flood, wear protective clothing, such as sturdy footwear, loose long-sleeved shirts and trousers and heavy duty work gloves. There may be asbestos debris in your home. Where there is extensive demolition, repair and renovation work involving asbestos-containing material, licensed asbestos contractors should be employed to undertake the work.

Flood recovery suggestions include:

- Start cleaning up as soon as possible. Tackle one room at a time, making sure you are working in a well-ventilated area.
- After talking with your insurer, as part of the clean-up, you should remove water-damaged possessions from the building (such as carpets and soft furnishings), and store these in a safe place. They may be required to be inspected as part of the claims process.
- Sweep out water. Don't forget to check for blocked drains in the shower and sinks.
- Open doors and windows to help the house dry out. Open access doors to air the underfloor of your house too.
- Consult with a building engineer to make sure your house is structurally sound.
- Repainting and redecorating should be left for at least three months – until your house is thoroughly dried out. Painting or papering too soon may result in mould, blistering and peeling. Laying floor vinyl too soon may also trap moisture.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- **State Emergency Service Victoria (SES)** Tel. **132 500** – for emergency flood or storm assistance
- **SES Victoria Flood and Storm Information Line** Tel. 1300 842 737
- **NURSE-ON-CALL** Tel. **1300 60 60 24** – for expert health information and advice 24 hours, 7 days a week.
- Local council
- Your insurance company.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Department of Health and Human Services - Emergency Management

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