

After the storm

FAQ: E. coli in flood waters

What is E. coli?

E. coli is a strain of bacteria that lives in the intestines of humans and animals and is can be found in all bodies of water, such as streams, lakes, ponds and canals. The vast majority of strains of E. coli are harmless. There are some strains, such as E. coli O157:H7, that are harmful and can produce a toxin that causes severe illness.

How did the E. coli get into the flood waters?

Generic E. coli is normally found in all streams, lakes and canals. When there is flooding along with a hurricane, the waters may contain fecal material from overflowing sewage systems and agricultural and industrial waste. It is likely that there are also disease-causing organisms in such contaminated water.

What can be done to prevent infection from water contaminated with sewage?

- Leave the flooded zone
- Avoid swallowing contaminated water
- Drink municipal or bottled water that has been treated with chlorine or other effective disinfectants. If bottled water is not available, boil water before drinking, washing, or using to brush teeth.
- Wash hands and feet that have been in contact with the contaminated water appropriately with soap and clean water. If soap and clean water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub to clean hands.
- If there has been a backflow of sewage into your house, wear rubber boots and waterproof gloves during cleanup. Remove and discard contaminated household materials that cannot be disinfected such as wall coverings, cloth, rugs, and drywall.
- If you have any open cuts or sores that will be exposed to floodwater, keep them as clean as possible by washing them with soap and clean water applying an antibiotic ointment to discourage infection.
- Wash clothes contaminated with flood or sewage water in hot water and detergent and separately from uncontaminated clothes and linens.
- Do not allow children to play in floodwater areas and do not allow children to play with floodwater-contaminated toys that have not been disinfected. Disinfect toys using a solution of one cup of bleach in five gallons of water.

What should I do if I or someone I am caring for has been exposed to sewage contaminated waters?

They may have been exposed to disease causing germs. They should take a bath or shower with clean water and soap, and clean their clothes and other belongings as described above. If wounds were exposed to the sewage contaminated floodwaters, clean and treat them as described above, watch their health status, and if they develop diarrhea, vomiting or fever, give them extra fluids to drink and seek medical evaluation.