

HOUSEHOLD FABRICS NEED CLEANING AFTER FLOOD

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COLLEGE STATION Seems like in Texas, it never rains but it pours. Recent heavy rains in parts of Central Texas and the Hill Country have left thousands of Texas families facing an enormous amount of cleaning up. When it comes to fabrics in the home, necessary clean-up after a flood can take a lot of time. But tips from Dr. Pamela J. Brown, Texas Cooperative Extension consumer sciences specialist, can help.

“Assume that flood water contains sewage waste or other harmful materials until you are advised otherwise,” Brown said. “Always wear protective gloves to handle wet clothing, carpets and other household items.”

And, she advised, homeowners need to be aware that, “mildew is the greatest threat to flood-damaged household goods,” and plan their clean-up accordingly.

FLOOD-DAMAGED CLOTHING:

– To eliminate the possibility of harmful bacteria, disinfect all flood-damaged clothing. Disinfectants such as chlorine bleach, quaternary ammonium compounds and pine oil phenolic compounds can be purchased at supermarkets, hardware stores, janitorial supply stores and other outlets. Before using, carefully read the labels to make sure of the correct usage.

– Do not use chlorine bleach on wool, silk, mohair, spandex, non-colorfast fabrics or fabrics with durable press finishes. Follow instructions on the cleaning labels, if possible.

– Clean water-based stains with water-based laundry soap or detergent; oily stains can be removed with solvent dry cleaning solutions.

– Fabrics covered with mud, clay soils and bacteria should be flushed with clear cold water before being cleaned.

– If necessary, rust removers for cleaning clothing can be purchased in supermarkets or hardware stores.

– “Dry-clean only” garments may need to be dry cleaned several times. Weigh the cost of multiple cleanings against the cost of the item. Replacement may be more cost-effective. Getting started:

1. First, separate wet clothing into two sections: clothing that can be saved and clothing that will be thrown away. Then separate the clothing to be laundered from the clothing to be dry cleaned. Clothing to be laundered should then be separated into darks and lights.

2. Rinse washable items in clear, cold water to dilute the soil. For very heavily soiled items, after multiple rinsings, soak overnight in cold water and liquid detergent.

3. If washing will be delayed, try to get the flood-damaged clothing as dry as possible to prevent mildew. Do NOT store wet clothes in plastic bags, and do not dry near a heat source or in a machine dryer since high heat may set the stains.

4. As soon as possible after rinsing, machine wash flood-damaged clothing with laundry detergent and disinfectant. (Read the detergent’s label for directions on use with heavily-soiled clothing.) Set the washing machine for the longest possible wash cycle, highest water level and hottest water temperature that is safe for the fabrics.

5. Dry at the highest safe temperature or line dry in the sun, since sun exposure kills many bacteria.

FLOOD-DAMAGED CARPETS:

As soon as possible, pull up carpets and rugs off the floor and drape outside. Hose them down with clear cold water. With a stiff-bristled broom, work a low-sudsing, disinfectant carpet cleaner deep into the weave. Rinse with a solution made from two tablespoons of liquid chlorine bleach to one gallon of water. (Do NOT use a chlorine bleach solution on wool carpets and rugs.)

Dry both the carpet and the floor completely before replacing the carpet. Fans, vacuum cleaners and/or dehumidifiers can help speed up drying. Allow subflooring to dry completely a process that might take weeks or months to prevent buckling.

FLOOD-DAMAGED UPHOLSTERED FURNITURE: Furniture that has been heavily soaked with flood waters might not be salvageable.

“However,” Brown said, “if the furniture is a special piece or has endured only mild water damage, it may be worth the effort to clean the item.”

- Remove the upholstery and stuffing (or padding) from the frame; throw away cotton stuffing. Other stuffing materials might be re-useable once dried and sanitized.
- Remove tacks from the frame. Wipe off springs and frame; dry all metal parts and apply a rust-inhibiting paint to the springs. Allow slow drying of wooden frames.
- Wash or dry clean upholstery.
- If furniture has developed mildew, take it outside and brush; vacuum the surface to pull mildew from the fabric. Carefully dispose of the vacuum cleaner bag to prevent spreading mold spores. Then wipe the remaining mildew, if any, with a cloth dampened with detergent suds. A solution of one-quarter teaspoon chlorine bleach to one cup of water can also be used. Let the furniture dry thoroughly. Services of a carpet and furniture cleaning company might be necessary.

OTHER HOUSEHOLD ITEMS:

- Mattresses can be often be salvaged, but the process is costly. Replacement might be a better choice.
- Pillows, especially those filled with feather, polyester or foam rubber, can be saved, although if heavily soaked, they may mildew. After brushing off surface dirt, wash feather pillows in a machine or by hand. If the outer cover is badly damaged, empty the feathers into a muslin bag, shake the feathers to distribute and stitch the bag closed. Wash in warm water, with disinfectant added, for 15 to 20 minutes. Dry in the dryer or on the line. Polyester fiberfill pillows or foam or urethane pillows can be washed in warm water with a low-sudsing detergent and disinfectant. Fiberfill pillows can be dried in the dryer or on the line; foam pillows should be dried away from heat and light.
- Washing machines and dryers should also be disinfected. In the washer, use one cup of chlorine bleach or three-quarters of a cup of pine oil disinfectant for a full tub of hot water. Run the longest possible wash cycle and rinse. For the dryer, unplug first, the wipe the entire dryer drum and door with a disinfectant solution of two tablespoons of chlorine bleach per cup of hot water. Wipe with a wet (not dripping) cloth in clean water, and leave the dryer door open until all areas are dry.
- Don't forget to disinfect all other areas such as laundry baskets, table tops, work surfaces and containers that might also come in contact with the cleaned clothing. For more information about cleaning up after floods, visit these Web sites: