

## AFTER THE FLOOD

# Answers to deluge of questions

HOUSTON CHRONICLE NEWS SERVICES



Jon Shapley / Houston Chronicle

To reduce the mildew in your house, pull up wet carpets as quickly as possible after flooding. Wooden floors may be salvageable.

Flooding brings more than water. A deluge of cleaning and insurance issues is sure to follow. In the morning, the phone calls start.

First, the insurance agent. Then a disaster recovery company to assess the damage and start drying out the

floors. Then a moving company to take furniture out of the house.

And don't forget to take photos of each item to document losses for the flood insurance claim.

From what to do with a soaked sofa to how to salvage your shoes, take a look at the gallery above for other answers to some of the most pressing questions you're faced with after a flood.

### Furniture

What do I do with wood furniture that was under water?

If it's solid wood and it was removed from the water quickly, there's a good chance of saving it. Waterlogged solid-wood furniture will dry in four to six weeks. Most finishes, including shellac, will survive if they are not in water more than five or six hours. They can be cleaned with soap and water or Murphy Household Cleaner Oil Soap. If they've blistered, they can probably be refinished. The bad news: Furniture made with particle board — even expensive veneered pieces — usually can't survive sitting in water for a long time.

Should we save a soaked sofa?

If upholstered pieces were submerged long, the outer fabric, inner padding, springs and frame may not be salvageable. Upholstered furniture with mild water damage may be worth trying to clean. Remove the covering and padding from the frame. Discard cotton padding or stuffing. You may be able to dry, sanitize and reuse padding made from other materials. Remove tacks from the frame and fabric. Wipe off the springs and frame; dry all metal parts. Apply rust-inhibiting paint to the springs. Allow wooden frames to dry. Wash upholstery fabric or send it to the dry-cleaners. Some fabrics can be cleaned; many cannot. If there are water rings, the piece probably will have to be reupholstered.

How do I treat mildewing furniture?

Take it outdoors and clean the surface with a brush or broom to remove loose mold. Vacuum the surface fabric to pull mold out of the fibers. Dispose of the vacuum cleaner bag carefully to avoid spreading mold spores. Wipe any remaining mildew with a cloth dampened with detergent suds. Avoid soaking the fabric and getting water into the padding. You also can wipe it with a damp cloth dipped in a solution of 1/4 teaspoon chlorine bleach and 1 cup water.

## Floors

Are my wood floors salvageable?

Wood swells when it gets wet and shrinks when it dries. Floors soaked for days will probably have to be replaced. If the water receded quickly, you may be able to replace some boards and refinish the rest. The key is getting the water out quickly. If you can pull up a few boards and use a wet/dry vacuum to suck up the water underneath, then put fans in every room to speed the drying, you may be in luck.

Is it really necessary to pull out wet carpets?

Yes, and as soon as possible to reduce mildew in the house. If carpet has been under contaminated floodwater, it should be discarded or steam-cleaned and dried thoroughly. Padding must be discarded. When handling or cleaning water-damaged carpet, wear rubber gloves for protection. You may be able to save carpet that has been soaked with clean rain water. Contact a professional carpet cleaner for estimates. If you do it yourself, drape carpets and rugs outside and hose them down with cold, clean water. If they've already dried, have them professionally cleaned or rent a heavy-duty steam-cleaning machine. Use a stiff-bristled broom to work in a low-sudsing, disinfectant carpet-cleaning product. Rinse thoroughly with a solution of 2 tablespoons liquid chlorine bleach to 1 gallon water — unless your carpets are wool. Dry carpet completely. Hire pros to lay the new padding and the cleaned carpet for best results.

## Clothing

Can I salvage clothes that were in flood water?

Yes, but speed is critical to prevent fading and mildew. And be aware that floodwaters can contain sewage and other harmful materials. Wear protective gloves to handle wet clothing, and separate washable garments from those that must be dry-cleaned. Do not store wet clothing in plastic bags. Wring as much water from garments as possible and hang them in well-ventilated areas to dry. Rinse washable, like-colored garments several times in cold water to dilute the soil. Soak heavily soiled items overnight in cold water and liquid detergent following initial rinses. Then begin the "real" washing and disinfecting to kill harmful bacteria. Disinfectants include chlorine bleach (2 tablespoons per washer load will be effective), quaternary ammonium compounds and pine oil phenolic compounds, all of which are available under various brand names at grocery stores. Washable garments with water-based stains need to be cleaned with

water-based detergents. Remove oily stains with solvent dry-cleaning solutions. Some oily, petroleum-based stains are more easily removed with liquid detergents than with powdered products. Rust removers may be used on washable clothing for rust stains. Some laundries will accept wet washable garments for washing, but it's best to call ahead.

How do I save my shoes?

Let shoes air dry — heat from dryers will shrink them. If they are particularly dirty, disinfect them and try using a leather cleaner or saddle soap to get them back into shape.

Can anything be done for mildewed leather garments or furniture?

Leather and suede garments, as well as leather upholstery, can be cleaned with the fungicide product ConSan Triple Action 20, available at most hardware stores. Be careful; this product can stain.

## **Mold**

How can I prevent mold from forming?

Get to work right away. Even if just an inch or two of water entered an area, the potential for mold must be addressed. It only takes 48 hours for mold to germinate. Dry everything quickly. For severe moisture problems, use fans and dehumidifiers and move wet items away from walls and off floors. Clean all hard surfaces with a detergent solution and hot water. Use a stiff brush or cleaning pad on block walls or uneven surfaces. Rinse them clean with water. Disinfect with a mild bleach solution; about 1 cup bleach per gallon of water. When disinfecting a large area, make sure the entire surface gets treated. Avoid excessive amounts of runoff or standing bleach. Don't rinse or wipe up the bleach. Let it dry naturally.

Caution: Never mix bleach with ammonia — the fumes are toxic.

If the odor doesn't go away, try the wash-rinse-dry process again. If that doesn't work, contact a licensed contractor for professional cleanup. If you can't get rid of the mold, consider removing the contaminated surface. Remove all drywall to at least 12 inches above the high water mark. Save a sample of the contaminated surface and store it outdoors until insurance adjusters arrive.

Can cleaning mold hurt my health?

Yes. Exposure to mold can occur during the cleaning stage. Mold exposure can cause allergic reactions, asthma episodes, infections and other respiratory problems. Wear rubber gloves and a mask or respirator during the cleanup and whenever handling moldy materials. Make sure the working area is well-ventilated. Wear protective clothing that can be easily cleaned or discarded.

## **Bedding**

Should I discard wet mattresses and pillows?

Cleaning and renovating them may cost more than buying new ones. Pillows filled with feathers, polyester or foam rubber may be salvageable. First, brush off surface dirt. Wash feather pillows by machine or by hand. If the outer ticking is badly damaged, transfer the feathers to a muslin bag larger than the pillow ticking. (Hint: Stitch an open end of the ticking to an open end of the bag. Shake the feathers into the bag, then stitch the bag closed.) Wash in warm water 15-20 minutes, adding a disinfectant. Rinse with warm water several times. Squeeze or spin excess water from the pillow and dry it in the dryer or line dry. Wash

polyester fiberfill by hand in warm water with a low-sudsing detergent and disinfectant. Rinse several times, and squeeze or spin off water in the washing machine. Fiberfill pillows may be dried in the dryer or line dried. Foam or urethane pillows should be dried away from heat and light.

## Tap water

Is yellow tap water safe to drink?

Maybe not. Avoid smelly or discolored water. Discoloration usually indicates a buildup of iron and manganese, two common elements found in tap water. Call your local public works department; they can flush out the pipelines in your area. Once that's completed, run your tap water for a few minutes. Health officials will warn the public whether water must be boiled or avoided.

## Insurance

What do I need to do to file a claim?

As many Houstonians know, homeowner's policies do not cover flood damage. If you have a flood insurance policy, contact your agent to start the claim process. Take photos to make sure the damages are documented for the claim. This should be the first step in the process to give the insurance adjuster a first-hand view of what the property looked like.

## Car

My car flooded. What do I do now?

If heavy rains left your car soggy, here's how to handle it:

1. Find your vehicle: The city may tow vehicles stranded in high water. To locate your vehicle, visit [findmytowedcar.com](http://findmytowedcar.com).
2. Don't try to start your car. Starting your car can fry the electronics or flood vital engine parts, causing more damage than might otherwise have occurred. Get your car towed to a nearby mechanic who can check it out.
3. Contact your insurer. They'll be able to help you with things like towing, repair and rental, depending on your specific coverage.
4. Arrange a rental as soon as possible, if one is needed. In a flood event, you won't be the only person in need of a rental.