

After florence comes the cleanup: stay safe

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Photo: US Army National Guard

(HealthDay)—True to its storm-of-the-century hype, Hurricane Florence pounded the Carolinas with historic rainfall and catastrophic flooding—and continuing danger looms in its wake.

Infection and injury are the big threats as cleanup begins, and experts say it's important to be smart as you tackle the dirty work.

"The 'it's-not-going-to-happen-to-me' attitude is what gets people killed and injured," said Dr. Ryan Stanton, a critical care specialist and spokesman for the American College of Emergency Physicians. "The assumption everybody has to make is that everything is sharp and everything is contaminated."

Be aware of the potential risks, wear protective gear and ask for help if you need it, health experts advise.

In particular, you should leave the work to others if your immune system is compromised, either by underlying disease or because you are taking immunosuppressants. And know your limits: If you've never used power tools such as a [chain saw](#), get help from someone who knows what they're doing.

Dr. Luis Ostrosky is a professor at McGovern Medical School at UTHealth in Houston and a fellow of the Infectious Diseases Society of America. He said that "it's important to clean up as soon as possible, but also to be as safe as possible."

Stanton and Ostrosky offer these tips for a safe storm recovery:

- **Beware hidden dangers in the water:** Floodwater is full of nasty stuff—from untreated sewage and livestock waste to venomous bugs and snakes. The longer [water](#) sits, the more germ-laden it gets. Avoid contact with it and wash up thoroughly with soap and water after you work. If you accidentally ingest contaminated water, your risk of infection is high. See a doctor if you develop any symptoms, especially a high fever and jaundice,

signs of a potentially deadly disease called leptospirosis, Ostrosky said.

- **Watch out for electrical hazards:** Standing water can be electrically charged if live wires are beneath it. Never enter floodwaters or a dwelling that is flooded without knowing for certain that the power has been shut off either at the house or at the neighborhood level. Call an electrician if you aren't sure.
- **Take steps to avoid insect bites:** Remove standing water to eliminate breeding grounds for mosquitoes, which spread serious illnesses like West Nile virus and encephalitis. Be aware that ant colonies may be present in floodwater. Their bites can cause a life-threatening allergic reaction.
- **Gear up:** Wear heavy gloves, closed-toe (preferably steel-toe) shoes, long sleeves and pants, as well as eye protection. If fecal contamination is likely, wear rubber boots and rubber gloves. If you're working around mold, you'll need an N-95 mask or heavy-duty respirator.
- **Tool safety is key:** After storms, emergency rooms see a lot of injuries caused by power tools—especially chain saws. "If you don't have a lot of experience with [power tools](#), you have to be extra careful," Stanton said. Make sure your chain saw is the right size for the job, follow directions for its use and beware of kickback. That's an uncontrolled reaction caused when the blade hits metal or wood that can cause serious injury.
- **Keep hydrated:** As you work, drink plenty of water, take frequent breaks and avoid working in the heat of the day.
- **Have a buddy:** If you are going to do significant repair work or have medical problems, make sure someone knows where you are and what you're doing so help can be summoned if needed.
- **Debris can be dangerous:** Watch your step around broken glass and wood, rusty nails and fallen or weakened branches. Remember that trees uproot easily in saturated ground. When cutting trees or branches that are bent or caught on something

else, avoid contact with power lines and take extra care.

- **Wound care is urgent:** Falls from ladders and rooftops often happen during cleanup, but cuts and scrapes are the most common post-storm injuries. Tend to them quickly, washing and disinfecting wounds. If signs of infection such as redness or pus develop, seek medical attention, Ostrosky said. If you get injured and haven't had a tetanus shot in more than five years, the doctor will likely recommend one.
- **Prevent mold:** Record rainfall means mold. "If not properly treated afterwards, you have potentially years of long-term exposure to mold," Stanton said. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends removing saturated drywall and insulation as soon as possible to reduce the health risk. Open doors and windows and use fans to circulate air. Toss anything you can't clean or dry quickly, and clean wet surfaces, using a mixture of 1 cup household bleach to 1 gallon water.

"Understand that there are going to be risks and dangers," Stanton said, "and that these are going to evolve over time. Just be safe."

Ostrosky added, "You will get through this."

More information: Ryan Stanton, M.D., medical director, Lexington Fire/EMS, Lexington, Ky., and spokesman, American College of Emergency Physicians; Luis Ostrosky, M.D., professor, infectious diseases, McGovern Medical School at UTHealth, Houston; Infectious Diseases Society of America; U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

For more disaster cleanup tips, visit the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/disaster/).

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