

Coping with floods

People have to cope with floods as soon as they arrive. Read this advice from a government agency:

Flood safety tips

- Do not walk through flowing water. Drowning is the number one cause of flood deaths. Six inches of water can knock you off your feet.
- Use a pole to make sure the ground is still there before you go through an area where the water is not flowing.
- Do not drive through a flooded area. More people are drowned in their cars than anywhere else. Don't drive around road barriers, the road or bridge may be washed out.
- Stay away from power lines and electrical wires. Electrocution is a major killer in floods. Electrical current can travel through water.
- Report downed power lines so they can be made safe.
- Turn off your electricity supply when you return home after a flood, or while the flood is happening. Don't use appliances that have become wet until they have been thoroughly dried.
- Watch for animals that have been washed out of their homes and may have taken refuge in yours.
- Look before you step. After a flood the ground is covered with debris, especially slippery mud.
- Be alert for gas leaks; do not use gas or charcoal fires indoors for temporary cooking without adequate ventilation because you may become affected by carbon monoxide gas.
- Clean everything that got wet. Floodwaters are not clean waters. They WILL have picked up sewage and chemicals from roads, farms, factories, and storage buildings. Spoiled food and flooded cosmetics and medicines are health hazards and should be thrown out.

Steps to recovery

- Take care of yourself first
- Disinfect everything that the floodwaters touched.
- Protect homes from further damage. Get fresh air moving through the home. Patch holes. Repair sagging floors and roof sections. Remove debris. Check for broken or leaking water pipes. Drain the basement carefully. Hose down the house and its contents.
- Get organised. Call the insurance agent and list the damage, then check for structural damage.
- Dry out your home. Floodwaters affect a house in three ways: water damages materials such as wallboards; they will disintegrate if they stay wet too long. Wood will swell, warp or rot. Mud, silt and pollutants in the water will contaminate everything that got wet. Dampness promotes the growth of mildew, a mould or fungus. To cure these things, lower the humidity by opening doors and windows, use a fan, use dehumidifiers (but with care). Dry the ceilings and walls. Finally, dry the floor. Restore the utilities (power, water, etc).
- Tackle one room at a time.

Rebuild and floodproof.

Don't just rebuild, build it back better. Use one of these: increase the elevation, relocate, build floodwalls. Develop a flood response plan. Keep sandbag materials available.

Background support

There are three stages to dealing with a flood: immediate response while the flood is happening, initial cleanup, and long-term recovery.

After disasters, government agencies and private organisations provide direct assistance to individuals, families and businesses with their most immediate medical, food, clothing, and housing needs. A wide range of volunteer organisations can also usually help in cleanup efforts. In addition, social service agencies, local, and national governments can provide temporary housing and counselling.

The material in the worksheet is based on information on what to do about flood disasters given by FEMA (US Federal Emergency Management Agency). It can be used as the basis of a project or class discussion. There is room for much more to be made from this material. No questions are provided on the sheet to allow you to use the material as flexibly as you wish.

Starting questions might be:

1. Why is electricity especially dangerous during a flood? (electrocution)
2. Floodwaters contain mud. What else might they contain that will be a problem? (pollution)

But there are many social questions that follow, including the need to be insured.

Disaster Assistance programs

Most governments only provide assistance for the most severe events when major disasters are declared. More than 9 out of 10 disasters are not declared by governments and so people cannot claim relief. Even so, when a government declares a disaster and, for example, makes a loan, it has to be repaid, usually with interest.

The amount of money any one person can get is limited. And when loans are made, the time it takes the average family to pay them back is over 15 years and the repayment amount per month is more than the private insurance policy premium that could have been taken out beforehand, usually by a factor of at least ten.

If students think their home is not going to be flooded, remind them that eight out of ten disasters include flooding. And because more buildings, roads, and parking areas are being built over land that was once natural soakaway, such as meadows and forests, the risk of flooding is increasing, even for those people who have never experienced a flood before. Insurance puts the homeowner in control, and then they don't have to wait for assistance, but can get on with rebuilding their lives immediately.

What does local government do in an emergency?

The local government agencies are the first to respond in an emergency. First on the scene are the police, fire, search and rescue, and ambulance services. Equally vital are the communications, transportation, and public works departments.

It is the long-term recovery phase of disaster that places the most severe financial strains on a government, especially the damage to public facilities such as sewerage systems, roads, and bridges.

Across the curriculum

Using this material you can link:

- Physical and chemical means of clearing up. The need for disinfectants and other disease-preventing materials;
- The way that the threat of disaster can bring a community together;
- The need for people to work together;
- The cost of coping with a flood, in terms of insurance costs, and also costs to the government for those people who do not have flood insurance.