



Iowa Department of Public Health
Division of Environmental Health

Frequently Asked Questions About Cleaning Flooded Basements

Overview: Recent storms and rainfall have caused flooding throughout Iowa. As residents clean out their flood-damaged homes, the Iowa Department of Public Health has been answering a lot of questions from the public. This fact sheet addresses those questions and others related to basement clean-up after a flooding event.

What should I do before entering a flooded basement?

1. Turn off the electricity, preferably at the meter. If you cannot safely turn it off, contact your utility company to have it disconnected.
2. Turn off all gas valves.
3. Check outside cellar walls for possible cave-ins, structural damage, or other hazards.
4. Open doors and windows, or use blowers to force fresh air into the basement. Gas may be trapped inside your home.
5. Wear rubber gloves when handling materials that have been in floodwater.

What should I know before pumping water out of my basement?

Do not use an electric pump powered by your own electrical system. Instead, use a gas-powered pump, or one connected to an outside line. Never place a gas-powered unit inside. Always place it outside in a well-ventilated area to avoid carbon monoxide.

More damage may be done by pumping water from the basement too soon or too quickly, than from letting the floodwater remain. Water in the basement helps brace the walls against the extra pressure of water-logged soil outside. If water is pumped out too soon, walls may cave in from the outside water pressure.

To help prevent structural damage, pump water out of your basement in stages. Remove about a third of the water each day to prevent structural damage or collapsing of basement walls due to unequal pressure.

What about the clean-up process?

- Shovel out any mud and debris while it is still moist.
- Hose down walls and remove as much silt as possible before it dries.
- Floors and walls may need sanitizing, particularly if sewage has entered the basement.
- Scrub walls and floors with a mild bleach and water solution (1/4 cup of bleach to a gallon of water). Allow the area to dry completely.

In homes without basements the area below the floor may be completely filled with mud. Remove the mud as soon as possible to avoid rotting floor joists or the foundation.