Howard County
Health Department

After the Storm: Injury Prevention

A severe storm can leave many problems in its wake. The media is usually filled with stories of people who are injured after a storm passes. Don't become a statistic.

- **Follow orders** of any emergency service personnel.
- **Drive cautiously.** Do not drive through flooded roads. Water may be deeper than it appears.
- **Wear a life jacket if you are near water.** In the event of rising floodwater, children and adults who are not strong swimmers should wear U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets – personal flotation devices (PFDs) – whenever they are in or around the water. Everyone, including strong swimmers, should wear a Coast Guard-approved PFD when in a boat used for rescue or escape. Select the PFD for the person's weight and size (printed on the label).
- **Watch out for loose or dangling power lines.** Stay away from them and report them immediately to the proper authorities.
- **Do not leave children unattended.** Do not allow them to play in or explore damaged or flooded areas. Keep chemicals used for cleaning and disinfecting, fuel for generators and pest-control substances out of reach of children.
- **Wear sturdy shoes or boots and protective clothing,** such as heavy pants, long sleeves and gloves, when cleaning up debris.
- **Use an insect repellent containing DEET** to reduce the risk of mosquito-borne illnesses, such as West Nile virus and Eastern equine encephalitis. Insects such as bees and wasps can become very aggressive after a storm. Survey the area before beginning cleanup and use a commercially available pesticide if needed.
- **Watch out for snakes.** They, too, have lost their habitat and may be found in places they normally wouldn't be.
- **Be careful around pets.** Animals may become frightened and act oddly after a storm. Be cautious when dealing with domestic animals like dogs and cats, especially those that you don't know, and avoid any contact with wild animals.
- **Don't get burned.** If you are using camp stoves or fires to cook with, pay attention and don't get burned.
- **Protect your eyes.** Make sure to wear eye protection if you are handling chainsaws. Watch where you are going – a storm may have placed materials at eye level that could be harmful.

- **Exercise particular caution in using power tools or tackling large debris,** which can shift suddenly. Chainsaws are particularly dangerous; get proper safety training before using one. Inexperienced individuals are routinely injured when using chainsaws in post-storm cleanup. Falls are common; use safety equipment and get trained help with large or difficult jobs. Don't take chances.

- **If the electrical power to your home is off** and you cook on a charcoal or gas grill, **carbon monoxide is a threat**. Use a grill only in an open, well-ventilated area, never inside the house, and keep it away from flammable materials. An odorless, colorless gas produced by combustion, carbon monoxide can be deadly.

- **The exhaust fumes from gasoline-powered generators** are another source of carbon monoxide poisoning. Never use a generator in an enclosed area, such as a basement or garage. Make sure the area is well-ventilated, dry and preferably covered.

- **Generators also pose electrical hazards.** Do not connect the generator to your home's electrical system. Instead, connect appliances directly to the generator with properly-sized polarized extension cords. Do not overload the generator or the cords, and place the cords where no one will trip over them. Be sure the generator is properly grounded (follow the manufacturer's directions). Before refueling, let the engine cool for at least two minutes to prevent fires. Store extra fuel in a safe, dry area.

- **If you are returning to a storm-damaged house,** be particularly careful. Before entering the building, check for structural damage to be sure there is no danger of collapse. Turn off any outside gas lines at the meter or tank and let the house air for a few minutes. Even if the electricity is off in the neighborhood, make sure the electrical power is turned off at the main breaker or fuse box. Electricity and water are a dangerous combination – if you have to step in water to get to the breaker box, call a professional electrician first for advice. Don't turn on any lights, appliances or gas systems until they've been tested. If you must enter the house at night, use a battery-operated flashlight as a light source, never an open flame, and do not smoke.

- **If the house has been flooded,** electrical wires and appliances will have to be cleaned and thoroughly dried, inside and outside, before they can be safely used again. Contact your electrical power company or a professional electrician for advice.

- **If you own a private well,** make sure to have it tested before resuming use after a flood.

Information is courtesy of the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Division of Public Health Occupational and Environmental Epidemiology Branch, http://epi.publichealth.nc.gov/oee.