



Potable water during hurricane-caused floods

Last month, while watching the news about Hurricane Harvey in Texas and Hurricane Irma in Florida and the Caribbean, I was amazed and gutted by footage of the floods and the devastation that Mother Nature can inflict. Seeing the floods on telly, it struck me how ironic life can be — so, so, so much water flooding everywhere, but everyone's first concern is to purchase potable water before and after the storm. News segments showed store shelves totally empty of water before the hurricanes arrived, with highly inflated prices due to high demand. We can actually survive for a long time without food — on average three weeks — but we can survive only about three days without water. Our bodies are 65 percent water.

I wrote an article several years ago about what to do in a power outage due to a catastrophic storm and how you can save your food safely with no electricity or working refrigeration. But what are we to do in a water shortage caused by storms? What do we do if our water is not drinkable? Flooding can affect water filtration plants that make the water potable. Sewage back-up and overflow can also adversely affect water plants and the water supply. Several weeks after Harvey, sections of Texas were still under “boil water” instructions, and a few days after Irma, many parts of Florida were still without running water.

When flood water mixes...

...with chemicals, as in Texas, and with sewage, as in most flood situations, a lot of really harmful chemicals and pathogens get mixed in the water. A first responder in Houston was diagnosed with the flesh-eating disease after conducting rescue operations in tainted flood waters. Flood waters also adversely affect crops. In Florida, the Food



WaterBob Emergency Bathtub Water Storage
Store 100 gallons of emergency water in your bathtub

and Drug Administration (FDA) announced, “Fresh fruits and vegetables that have been inundated by flood waters cannot be adequately cleaned and should be destroyed.” Produce is not allowed to be sold or consumed by the public if it has touched flood waters. Also, if you have been exposed to flood waters and have had to walk in it, bathe as soon as possible or have some disinfectant on hand to apply on cuts or wounds.

Before the storm...

Be prepared. Purchase bottled water or fill containers with potable water before the storm comes. Also, consider filling your bathtub with water to be able to flush your toilets. I saw a tub-sized plastic bag called “Waterbob” for less than \$25 that can be used in a tub and which will hold 100 gallons of potable water. It also includes a pump dispenser that you can use to fill up other containers. The water is supposed to stay fresh for up to 16 weeks. Estimate that most people need at least two quarts of water per day.

During the storm...

Avoid flood waters, if you can, to avoid possible infection. Drink only

stored/bought water. Use potable water to wash your hands and brush your teeth. Your pets need potable water to drink, too.

After the storm...

Refer to your local authorities to find out when tap water is safe to drink. Flush toilets with water you might have stored from your bathtub or use leftover water from hand or dish washing. If you are told to boil water first before drinking it, boil the water for a rolling boil for at least 10 minutes for it to be considered safe. Note, however, that many chemical pollutants will not be removed by boiling. Using bleach to disinfect water is also an option as long as the bleach contains no extra whiteners or scents. The formula when using household bleach containing 5.25-8.25 percent chlorine, according to the Washington State Department of Health, is five drops for every one quart/one liter of water. Bleach will not kill some disease-causing organisms commonly found in surface water, and it will not remove chemical pollutants. Keep your boiled or bleached water in tightly closed clean and disinfected containers. If you have well water, it will have to be tested and disinfected after the flood waters recede.

To avoid spreading disease...

...make sure you wash your hands often with potable water and soap. Food that has touched the flood waters will have to be thrown out. You can recondition/save canned goods if you wash the cans and remove the labels before opening if they are not dented or damaged. If the labels are removed from cans, you will have to relabel the cans with the common name of the food.

Whether it is your home or a restaurant, you will also have to clean and sanitize all surfaces that have been touched by the flood waters. If your equipment is made of wood or plastic laminate, it should be discarded. Your stainless steel equipment should be safe after cleaning and sanitizing. Unfortunately, there is always the possibility of mold after a storm — presume that there is mold on any surface if it is still wet for more than 24 hours. You will have to flush all equipment with waterlines, such as your ice machines and your drink dispensers. You will have to discard and replace flooring and any upholstered furnishings from your dining room.

I personally suggest — if there is any doubt in regards to your food, equipment, or furnishing — it's best to discard and replace. Health is more important than saving a seat cushion or a can of food. Stay Safe! Please.

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