

Mendip District Council

Sewage Treatment Systems and Flooding

During the recent heavy rains and subsequent flooding many septic tanks and small private sewage treatment systems will have been adversely affected. For many, this will be a source of significant anxiety for a number of reasons including; drains not working, contamination of private drinking water supplies and contamination of buildings and belongings with effluent contaminated water. The potential for ill health is potentially greater than normal but if you follow the simple steps below the risks can be reduced.

What's the best health advice – isn't there a risk from bugs in the water?

Infection problems arising from floods in this country are rare. Usually any harmful bugs in floodwater are in small concentrations and present a low risk, but there are a few precautions to take when dealing with flooding to reduce the risk of health problems:

- Wherever possible, try to avoid coming into direct contact with floodwater. If you have to go into the water, wear waterproof gloves and rubber boots and remember to be careful of potentially concealed hazards – e.g. trip hazards, dislodged drain covers etc.
- Wash your hands – this is the most important way to get rid of harmful bugs. Use warm, clean water and soap, then rinse and dry your hands after going to the toilet, before eating or preparing food, after being in contact with flood water, sewage or with items that have been in the water. Use cold water to wash if warm is not available. If there is no clean water, use disposable soapy, wet wipes to carefully clean all parts of your hands and dry them.
- Cover cuts etc. with waterproof plasters.
- Keep children out of the water
- Don't eat any food that has been touched or covered by floodwater or sewage

Should I take any precautions regarding my children?

Do not allow children to play in flood-water areas.

Do not let young children play on affected paved or concreted areas until they have been cleaned down and restored to their normal condition. Sunlight and soil help destroy harmful bacteria so it is usually safe for children to play on grass a week or so after the floodwater has gone.

Do wash children's hands frequently – particularly after playing outdoors and always before meals.

Do seek medical advice, as under normal circumstances, if infants are unwell with diarrhoea and vomiting.

Wash floodwater-contaminated toys with hot water and detergent before allowing them to be used. For soft toys, put them in a hot (60°C) machine wash, along with any other affected fabric items.

What if I start to feel unwell?

If you feel unwell this does not necessarily mean that you are suffering from any infection. If you are concerned, then call NHS Direct (tel:111) or visit your family doctor. You should contact your family doctor if you become ill after accidentally swallowing contaminated water or mud and tell the doctor your house was flooded.

Both the physical stress associated with the effort in cleaning up premises and the mental stress caused by temporary relocation may make you feel unwell. Remember that tiredness, difficulty sleeping and anxiety are normal in these circumstances and may go away with time. If you're feeling overwhelmed, contact friends, relations or your family doctor. And keep warm – cold can lead to hypothermia.

Do I empty my septic tank during flooded or saturated ground conditions?

Not usually-be advised by your supplier. Emptying the tank could cause it to try to float out of the ground and may damage the inlet and outlet pipes.

What if my sewerage system has been used to dispose wastewater from my business?

In addition to raw sewage, small businesses may use their septic system to dispose of wastewater containing chemicals. If your septic system that receives chemicals leaks then take extra precautions to prevent skin, eye and inhalation contact. The appropriate clean-up may depend on what chemicals are found in the wastewater.

What do I do with my septic system after the flood?

Once floodwaters have receded, there are several things homeowners should remember:

- Do not use the sewerage system until water in the soil absorption field is lower than the water level around the house.
- Have your septic tank professionally inspected and serviced if you suspect damage. Signs of damage include settling or an inability to accept water. Most septic tanks are not damaged by flooding since they are below ground and completely covered. However, septic tanks and pump chambers can fill with mud and debris, and may require professional cleaning.
- Only trained specialists should clean or repair septic tanks because tanks may contain dangerous gases.
- If sewage has entered your house thoroughly clean the area and then disinfect the floor, walls etc. Use a bleach solution to disinfect the area thoroughly.
- Do not compact the soil over the soil absorption field by driving or operating equipment in the area. Saturated soil is especially susceptible to compaction, which can reduce the soil absorption field's ability to treat wastewater and lead to system failure.
- If your system has any electrical equipment use a suitably qualified electrician to ensure that it is safe before switching it on.
- Be sure the septic tank's manhole cover is secure and that inspection ports have not been blocked or damaged.
- Check the vegetation over your septic tank and soil absorption field. Repair erosion damage and sod or reseed areas as necessary to provide turf grass cover.

For further advice contact Customer Services on 0300 303 8588