



HOW TO GET HELP, STAY SAFE AND PROTECT YOUR SANITY

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How to get help, stay safe and protect your sanity after a devastating hurricane

By [Holly Yan](#), CNN

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Hurricane victims returning to damaged houses face a torrent of challenges – if they're lucky enough to have a home standing at all. Flooding. Mold damage. Insurance headaches. Deadly hidden hazards.

The onslaught of mental anguish and post-hurricane dangers can seem overwhelming. Here's how victims can stay safe, get help and take the first steps toward recovery:

Don't go home until it's truly safe

Just because the hurricane is over doesn't mean it's safe to drive.

Residents should "return home only when local officials say it is safe to do so," the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) says.

If you see a flooded road, officials stress a life-saving but often ignored mantra: "[Turn around, don't drown](#)." Every year, more deaths occur due to flooding than from any other thunderstorm-related hazard, the National Weather Service says.

"Don't drive in flooded areas – cars or other vehicles won't protect you from floodwaters," the [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) says. "They can be swept away or may stall in moving water." If it's too dangerous to go home, search for open shelters in your area on the [American Red Cross](#) or [Salvation Army](#) websites.

You can also download the [FEMA Mobile App](#) to find open shelters, text SHELTER (or REFUGIO in Spanish), and your ZIP code to 4FEMA (or 43362).

Use extreme caution when you get home

When it's safe to go home, try to [arrive during daytime hours](#) so you don't need any lights, the CDC says. You might not have power in the area.

Once you get there, "Walk carefully around the outside of your home to check for loose power lines, gas leaks, and structural damage," the National Weather Service says.

If your home is flooded, "[wait to re-enter your home until professionals tell you it is safe](#)," with no structural, electrical or other hazards," the CDC says.

If the home is damaged, "[leave immediately if you hear shifting or unusual noises](#)," the CDC says. "Strange noises [could mean the building \(is\) about to fall](#)."

If you must use lighting, carry a battery-powered flashlight – not candles or gas-powered lanterns. "[Turn on your flashlight before entering](#) a vacated building," the National Weather Service says. "The battery could produce a spark that could ignite leaking gas, if present."

Minimize the risk of electrocution

Flooded homes require additional precautions to prevent electrocution.

"If you have standing water in your home and can turn off the main power from a dry location, then go ahead and turn off the power," [the CDC says](#).

"If you must enter standing water to access the main power switch, then call an electrician to turn it off. NEVER turn power on or off yourself or use an electric tool or appliance while standing in water."

In general, "Do not wade in flood water, which can contain dangerous pathogens that cause illnesses, debris, chemicals, waste and wildlife," the FEMA website [Ready.gov](#) says. "Underground or downed power lines can also electrically charge the water."

Photograph the damage and seek help if needed

If it's safe to go inside, don't start cleaning right away.

First, "[contact your insurance company and take pictures](#) of the home and your belongings," the CDC says. Those seeking federal assistance can call 1-800-621-FEMA (1-800-621-3362 or TTY 1-800-462-7585) or apply at [DisasterAssistance.gov](#).

Residents who have flood insurance from FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program can start their claim at [FloodSmart.gov](#).

Clean safely and beware of mold

"If your home has been flooded and has been closed up for several days, [assume your home has mold](#)," the CDC says.

"[You need to completely dry everything](#), clean up the mold, and make sure you don't still have a moisture problem."

The CDC has a list of ways to [eliminate and prevent mold growth, with or without electricity](#).

Mold can be cleaned by using a mixture of [1 cup of bleach with 1 gallon of water](#). Don't use the bleach solution in an enclosed space – make sure doors or windows are open, the CDC says.

But anyone with a lung condition such as asthma or who is immunocompromised "should not enter buildings with indoor water leaks or mold growth that can be seen or smelled, even if they do not have an allergy to mold," the FEMA website [Ready.gov](#) says.

"Children should not take part in disaster cleanup work."

Any remaining floodwater can contain sewage and other hazards that can be difficult to see.

"[Floodwater can contain dangerous bacteria from overflowing sewage](#) and agricultural and industrial waste," the CDC says.

"While skin contact with floodwater doesn't pose a serious health risk by itself, eating or drinking anything contaminated with floodwater can cause diseases."

Don't succumb to deadly heat

With widespread power outages expected, it's critical to not overexert yourself when there's no air conditioning.

"If exertion in the heat makes your heart pound and leaves you gasping for breath, STOP all activity," [the CDC warns](#). "Get into a cool area or into the shade, and rest, especially if you become lightheaded, confused, weak, or faint."

With intense heat, it's also important to drink plenty of fluids "regardless of how active you are," the CDC says. ["Don't wait until you're thirsty to drink."](#)

Never use a portable generator inside your home

Generators can be immensely helpful for storm victims without power. They can also be deadly when used incorrectly.

"Carbon monoxide poisoning is one of the leading causes of death after storms in areas dealing with power outages," the National Weather Service says.

["Never use a portable generator inside your home or garage,"](#) even if the doors and windows are open.

"Only use generators outside, more than 20 feet away from your home, doors, and windows," the NWS says.

Be extra cautious when using gas-powered appliances, as they can also lead to carbon monoxide poisoning. It's also a good idea to have a battery-powered carbon monoxide detector, as [carbon monoxide is invisible and odorless](#).

Make sure your food and water supplies are safe

Keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible until the power comes back. If it's been less than four hours, food is still safe to eat. Otherwise, the food can be spoiled and cause serious illness. "When in doubt, throw it out," the CDC says.

Throw away any food that may have come into contact with floodwater or stormwater, perishable food that may have not been refrigerated properly and anything that does not look, smells or feels like it should.

If your area is under a boil water advisory, take that guidance seriously. If it's not possible to boil water, use bottled water.

But never use contaminated water – either suspected or confirmed – to wash dishes, brush your teeth, wash and prepare food, wash your hands, make ice or make baby formula.

Find creative ways to keep your phone alive

Ideally, residents have ways to charge cell phones without the use of electricity – for example, with an external battery pack or battery-powered charger.

Those who don't might have to get creative – such as [using your car and a car adapter to charge your phone](#).

Take care of your emotional health

"Stress, anxiety, and other depression-like symptoms are common reactions after a disaster," the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration says.

When logistical nightmares collide with overwhelming emotions, don't try to tough it out alone. That can actually impede your recovery, the CDC says.

"Taking care of your [emotional health during an emergency will help you think clearly and react to the urgent needs](#) to protect yourself and your family," the CDC says.

"Coping with these feelings and getting help when you need it will help you, your family, and your community recover from a disaster."

Storm victims can contact [SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline](#) by calling or texting 1-800-985-5990.

The helpline "is a 24/7, 365-day-a-year, national hotline dedicated to providing immediate crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any natural or human-caused disaster," SAMHSA's website says.

“Our staff members provide counseling and support before, during, and after disasters and refer people to local disaster-related resources for follow-up care and support.”