

# Disaster Relief

## *Salvaging Clothing*



For purposes of treating clothing damaged by floodwaters, decisions and actions must be made quickly to avoid more staining, mildew and mold, unpleasant odors, and spreading contamination. Simply drying flood-damaged clothing is not enough. In worst-case situations, decide what clothing to attempt to save and proceed to action. Time and large piles of clothes may make the salvaging operation impossible. Contaminated clothing is a serious health issue, and care should be taken to protect people handling it. Be sure to disinfect working spaces. All flooded clothing must be washed with a disinfectant.

First, read labels and sort clothes into two piles: washable and dry-clean only. Then sort washables into two piles: machine-washable and hand-wash only. Dry-cleaning procedures and cleaning leather and suede will be addressed at the end of this publication, along with fragile family heirloom garments or textiles (baptismal gowns, quilts).

### **Machine-Washable Garments**

- If garments (wet or dry) have been exposed to contamination (sewer, run-off water), try to move outside to begin treatment. It may be necessary to wear waterproof gloves and boots. If mold is present, use an N100 face mask. Use a hose and large soaking container for pretreatment as long as tap water is no longer contaminated. If treating clothing indoors, provide adequate ventilation when using chemicals.

- If clothes are both contaminated and stained, use the right detergent and an approved sanitary disinfectant to treat (see list on next page).

### ***Wet Garments***

- Proceed to the wet contaminated clothes first and pretreat, if needed, for mud and stains. Separate wet white clothes and wet colored clothes, as these will be treated differently and dyes may bleed onto light-colored clothes. Very dark colors may need to be separated from both whites and colors into a third pile if dye is present.
- To prevent mildew and mold formation, do not sort and store wet or damp garments in plastic garbage bags for any reason. Both mildew and mold can make clothing unsalvageable. For stained garments, work a heavy-duty detergent (liquid) or paste of granule detergent into all stained areas. To remove a protein-based stain (raw sewage), use an enzyme presoak product (Biz). Let stand 30 minutes or follow instructions on package.
- Rinse garments until water is clear. Re-treat for heavy soil, and rinse again until water is clear. Avoid introducing muddy water into a washing machine, which may damage parts and systems.
- Before adding clothes, fill the machine with the hottest water allowed for fabrics to the highest level, and add detergent and a sanitizing disinfectant. For heavy soils, use a bit more detergent than referenced on the package.

Choose one of the following disinfectants based on the wash load:

- ▲ *Liquid chlorine bleach* (Clorox, Purex) for whites, if safe. Do not use on washable wools, spandex, or silks. Follow directions carefully. Note that oxygen-based bleaches (Clorox 2, Purex 2) are generally safe for colors. However, these products are intended for stain removal but are not classified as disinfectants.
- ▲ *Pine oil disinfectant* (Pine-O-Pine, Fyne Pine) is safe for most washable garments. Do not use on washable wools and silks, since the odor will remain. Follow container instructions for amount needed for disinfection.
- ▲ *Phenolic disinfectant* (Pine-Sol, Al-Pine) is safe for most washable garments. Do not use on washable wools and silks, since the odor will remain. Follow container instructions for amount needed for disinfection.
- ▲ It may be helpful to add a laundry-booster product (Borax) to the wash to help eliminate odors.

**Note:** Disinfectant product names change over time, so be sure to read product labels carefully.

- Do not overload the tub.
- As a safety reminder, never mix bleach and ammonia in the wash, as the combination produces toxic fumes.
- When the wash cycle is over, check the clothes carefully. If stains and/or odors remain, repeat the process as many times as needed. If rinse water is dirty or cloudy, continue to wash and rinse until the water is clear.
- Do not proceed to machine drying until all stains and odors are addressed or no other options exist. Machine drying will set stains permanently.

- Once treatments and washings are completed, machine or line dry. Both methods sanitize, but machine drying may cause shrinkage and will set stains that have not been removed. Follow garment label suggestions.
- *Mildew and mold:* Go outside to brush off garment. Rub liquid (or a paste of granular) detergent into the stain. Launder using detergent and bleach (if allowed for fabric type) and hottest water safe for fabric. Garments with visible mildew may need to be treated several times; be aware that these garments may be damaged beyond repair and not salvageable. If mold is present, use a covering garment and mask. Remember, mold can begin forming in as little as 48 hours on damp or wet clothes.
- *Fiberglass particles in clothing:* Fiberglass particles from insulation dispersed during a tornado may become lodged in clothing and cause skin irritation. There is not a satisfactory method for salvaging this clothing, so clothing should be discarded.

### ***Dry Garments***

- Brush off loose dirt and residue. Rinse in clean, cool water to remove mud and flood water. It may take several rinses before rinse water is clear. Then proceed with pretreatment and disinfecting washing instructions above. Never assume that dry clothing has not been contaminated.

### **Hand-Wash Only Garments**

Read labels carefully. Adapt the instructions above for pretreating, washing, and drying. Do not place in a washer, unless it is by last resort and the garment does not seem salvageable with hand-washing only.

## Dry-Cleanable Clothing

Be sure to shake and brush well to remove as much dirt as possible. Give the dry cleaner as much information as possible about what caused the damage and the fiber content of the fabric. The cost of dry-cleaning multiple times may outweigh the value of the clothing.

### *If Dry-Cleaning Service Is Not Available*

Follow one of these steps to stabilize garments until dry-cleaning is available:

- **Garments still damp with muddy water.** Rinse in cold water to remove water-soluble, clay-type soil. Rinse garment as quickly as possible to avoid bleeding of dyes and to lessen shrinkage. Gently squeeze out water and shake out wrinkles. Rolling in dry towels helps remove extra water. Place the garment on a hanger and dry in cool air, or smooth it out on a flat surface to dry.
- **Partly wet, soiled garments.** Try to rinse out the wet portion without dipping the entire garment in cold water. If a strong stain line is visible, dip the entire garment. Shake out wrinkles and dry in cool air.
- **Wet but not soiled garments.** Dry in cool air to prevent mildew and transfer of dye (bleeding).

## Leather and Suede Goods

Allow leather and suede garments, shoes, belts, and handbags to dry away from direct heat. Then follow these steps:

- Brush off as much mud as possible.
- Use mild soap suds and cool water to wipe off remaining dirt.
- Rinse with clean water and wipe gently with a clean cloth until all dirt is removed. Do not get the leather or suede too wet while cleaning.
- Stuff shoes, handbags, and sleeves with paper so they will hold their shape. Avoid using shoe trees, which may overstretch wet leather.

- Dry away from sun or a heater, which may harm leather. Use a circulating fan to speed drying.
- When completely dry, try cleaning with saddle soap to condition the leather (available at shoe stores, grocery stores, or western stores).
- An oil for use on leather or suede may be used to soften and prevent stiffening. However, the product may darken the leather, so check before using.
- For shoes, shoe polish may help restore color.
- Use a suede brush to restore suede to its original appearance. Be sure to brush in one direction only.

## Heirloom Clothing and Quilts

Heirloom clothing and quilts are often very fragile. If the textile is wet, treat immediately; or lay out to dry if unable to handle the garment until a later time. With extra caution, some sturdy white cotton and linen garments may be treated following the instructions above. Check with a trusted dry-cleaner who may offer assistance for heirlooms. Valuable heirloom clothing (sentimental and/or monetary value) may need the attention of a professional conservator (see the American Institute for Conservation website at [www.conservation-us.org](http://www.conservation-us.org) for a list). For advice on quilts that require special care, check with the state quilt association, which will have members who can provide guidance or who may actually treat the quilt.

### *Freezing Procedures*

For valuable or sentimental clothing that cannot be treated immediately, consider freezing in a plastic bag (to protect from other freezer contents). Avoid making too many folds because this can cause fiber breakage in fragile items. When ready to treat, thaw completely first.

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