

Protecting your health after flooding

By Deb Wines

In June of 2022, heavy rain, warm temperatures and rapid snowmelt caused major flooding of the Yellowstone River and its tributaries, resulting in closure of Yellowstone National Park and destruction of roads, bridges and houses throughout the region. In Billings, the unprecedented flooding forced the temporary closure of the city water treatment plant, leaving only a 24-to-36-hour water supply.

June of 2023 brought record three-day rainfall in the Billings area. Runoff overwhelmed stormwater systems, leaving damage in numerous areas of town including a massive sinkhole on Gabel Road.

These recent floods raised awareness that Yellowstone County residents need to be prepared for such emergencies. Floods can happen anywhere, even with breaks in irrigation ditches. Our biggest concern in the Billings area is the Yellowstone River. According to Risk Factor, 7,303 properties in Yellowstone County have greater than a 26% chance of flooding over the next 30 years.

Severe floods can happen on any given year, and their frequency and severity are greater than in the past.

After flooding, do not return to your home until you know it is safe to do so. Be cautious in areas that have come in contact with flood water. Flood waters can be contaminated with sewage, trash, chemicals, and potential disease-causing organisms.

Here are some tips for avoiding foodborne and waterborne illnesses after a flood:

- Use gloves and waterproof boots to protect yourself from exposure.
- Examine any food in your home carefully. Food that has come into contact with flood water should be discarded. Food in undamaged commercial cans or impermeable pouches that can be cleaned and disinfected can be recovered.
- Containers with screw caps, snap lids, pull tops and crimped caps should be discarded because they cannot be thoroughly disinfected.
- To disinfect food cans and pouches before opening, follow these steps:
 1. Remove labels.
 2. Wash and rinse with soap or detergent and warm water.
 3. Soak cleaned cans in disinfectant (one cup of household bleach in five gallons of water).
Use caution: wear rubber gloves and do not mix detergent with bleach.
 4. Air dry and relabel disinfected food containers.
 5. Reinspect. If you have any doubts, throw it out.

Power outages often accompany flooding. If your refrigerator has been without power for more than four, throw away any food that requires refrigeration.

Water supplied by the city of Billings or other municipality is safe unless warnings are issued. Don't assume that water from flooded wells, cisterns or springs is safe. When flood waters have receded, these

water sources should be tested and treated as necessary. In the meantime, bottled water can be used for drinking, washing and cleaning.

Alternatively, water can be made safe by boiling for five minutes or treating with bleach (no scents or other additives) at 20 drops to one gallon of water and letting stand for five minutes before use.

After removing flood dirt and silt in your home, walls and floors should be thoroughly cleaned, rinsed and then disinfected with a chlorine solution (one cup bleach in five gallons of water). Items that cannot be cleaned and disinfected should be discarded.

Help protect your home and business from post-flood mold growth by having them cleaned professionally.

Deb Wines, RiverStone Health registered sanitarian, can be reached at 406-256-2770.