Advice Sheet - Personal Safety during Floods

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Categories: Environment

Floods are one of the most common hazards found throughout the world. Nonetheless, all floods are not alike; some develop slowly, sometimes over a period of days, but flash floods can develop quickly, sometimes in just a few minutes, and without any visible signs of rain. Flash floods often have a dangerous wall of roaring water that carries a deadly cargo of rocks, mud, and other debris, which can sweep away most things in its path. Overland flooding occurs outside a defined river or stream, such as when a levee is breached and can be destructive. Flooding can also occur from dam breaks, producing effects similar to flash floods. Floods can cause power outages, damage buildings, disrupt transportation, and result in landslides.

What to Do If You Suspect You Are in a Potential Flood Situation

Inquire with the local officials or your lodging managers where the nearby flood-prone or high-risk areas are. Ask about official flood warning signals and what to do when you hear them.

If in an area prone to flooding, be prepared to evacuate. Learn the area's flood evacuation routes and where to find high ground.

What to Do during a Flood

- Be aware of flash flooding. If there is any possibility of a flash flood, move immediately to higher ground. Do not wait for instructions to move.
- Listen to local radio or television stations for up-to-date information. Evacuate immediately if ordered to do so.
- Be aware of streams, drainage channels, canyons, and other areas known to flood suddenly. Flash floods can occur in these areas with or without such typical warning signs as rain clouds or heavy rain. If there is any possibility of a flash flood, move immediately to higher ground. Do not wait for instructions to move.
- If local authorities issue a flood watch, prepare to evacuate. Secure your lodgings. If you have time, tie down or bring outdoor equipment and lawn furniture inside. Move essential items to the upper floors. If instructed, turn off utilities at the main switches or valves. Disconnect electrical appliances. Do not touch electrical equipment if you are wet or standing in water.
- Fill the bathtub with water in case water becomes contaminated or services are cut off. Before filling the tub, sterilize it with a diluted bleach solution (one part bleach to 10 parts water).

- Do not walk, swim or drive through moving water. Six inches (15 cm) of moving water can knock you off your feet while one foot (0.3 m) of moving water can sweep vehicles away. If you must walk in a flooded area, walk where the water is not moving. Use a stick or pole to check the firmness of the ground in front of you.

- Do not drive into flooded areas. Six inches (15 cm) of water will reach the bottom of most passenger cars causing loss of control and possible stalling. A foot (30 cm) of water will float many vehicles. Two feet (60 cm) of water can carry away most vehicles, including sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and pickups.

- If floodwaters rise around your car, abandon the car and move to higher ground, if you can do so safely. You and your vehicle can be quickly swept away as floodwaters rise.

What to Do after a Flood

- Avoid floodwaters. The water may be contaminated by oil, gasoline, or raw sewage. The water may also be electrically charged from underground or downed power lines.

- Avoid moving water.

- Be aware of areas where floodwaters have receded. Roads may have weakened and could collapse under the weight of a car.

- Stay away from downed power lines and designated disaster areas.

- Return to your lodgings only when authorities indicate it is safe. Stay out of buildings if surrounded by floodwaters. Use extreme caution when entering buildings. There may be hidden damage, particularly in foundations.

- Wash any body parts that come in contact with floodwaters with soap and clean water.

- Throw away food that has come in contact with floodwaters.

- Monitor local radio and television news to learn whether the community's water supply is safe to drink.

- Listen to local media for information about where to seek assistance for housing, clothing, and food, if necessary.

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