

Important Information for Volunteers in Helping Disaster Victims Get Back to a Healthy Home



This guide is intended for volunteers and professionals who assist in recovery and rebuilding after natural disasters. This guide will help you stay safe and make sure the work you are doing is effective.

Listen to directions from team leaders - The team leaders are there to make sure that you are safe.

Treat all debris and damaged housing material as hazardous material - The team leaders will instruct you to wear protective gear when appropriate. Make sure to wear the protective gear assigned; your health and safety depend on it.

Be safe - Protect yourself and others from injury during restoration. Injuries to recovery teams after the disaster is over, such as chainsaw accidents, cuts from broken glass, electrical shock, sprains and strains, falls, burns and other accidents are all too common.

A damaged home can pose health risks for the response and repair teams. These hazards include unsafe conditions (structural, utility and pest hazards), mold, asbestos, lead-based paint, polluted water, sewage and other contaminants. Improper restoration methods can worsen, or even cause, some hazards, so make sure that instructions are followed during restoration.

The following information describes some of the potential hazards that can arise in a home following a disaster, and the health and safety concerns associated with the hazards.

Mold grows in damp areas and is encouraged by warm temperatures and prolonged wetness after a disaster. If you are sensitive to mold, you may experience nasal stuffiness, eye irritation, wheezing, or skin irritation. Follow instructions where mold may be present, including wearing respirators if the conditions call for it.

Asbestos may be present in materials found in older houses and buildings. Inhaling this dust may cause serious health problems. Follow instructions where asbestos-containing materials may be present, to avoid creating or inhaling dust.

Lead-Based Paint may be present in older homes. Inhaling or consuming dust or paint chips can create serious health problems. Follow instructions where lead-based paint may be present, to avoid creating or inhaling dust.

Water quality may be impacted by a disaster and water sources could be contaminated. If a water source is contaminated, water related illnesses could develop. Use caution around unknown water sources and only consume water that has been provided or designated as safe to drink.

Home Safety addresses structural damage, unstable materials, chemical spills, vermin, gas leaks, or electrical hazards. Follow instructions and use caution when entering homes that experienced damage.

Utilities such as temporary heating or power sources may be in use on the work site. Possible hazards from gas powered machines include carbon monoxide, which can cause severe illness or even death. Plan for a safe back-up heat source in the event of an emergency. If it's a wood stove or fireplace, make sure it exhausts to the outdoors and has a duct to provide outside air for combustion. Another hazard is shock or fire hazards from impacted electrical connections. Electrical connections in formerly flooded spaces may pose shock or fire hazards when reconnected to the power. Follow instructions while around machines and electrical sources.

The most important thing to remember is to follow directions from team leaders so that you and others remain safe while helping to repair housing.