

# Cleaning Flood-Soiled Clothing and Bedding

## WHAT TO SALVAGE AND HOW TO CLEAN IT

**Unfortunately, cleaning your flood-soiled clothing and bedding is not the same as doing the usual family wash. Items need to be sanitized as you wash them. And your washing machine may be flood-damaged, making machine washing out of the question until you can get to a laundromat or friend's house. Nevertheless, you can help prevent mildew damage to clothes and bedding by sorting and drying items as soon as possible.**

**Even if your washing machine was not flooded, avoid using it until you know that the water is safe enough to drink and that your sewer line works. Before you wash clothes in the machine, run it through one full cycle. Be sure to use hot water and a disinfectant or sanitizer, such as chlorine bleach.**

### CLOTHING

When cleaning flood-damaged clothing:

- ◆ Separate wet items as soon as possible to keep clothing colors from running together. Sort out clothing that should be drycleaned.
- ◆ Take clothes and linens outdoors and shake out dried mud or dirt. Hose off extremely muddy items to avoid clogging your drain when you wash. If you don't have access to water, simply dry things out.
- ◆ If possible, soak badly soiled items overnight in cold water and detergent. Wring out and air dry if you're unable to machine wash right away.
- ◆ Check the labels on clothes and linens, and wash them in detergent and warm water if possible. Adding chlorine bleach to the wash cycle will remove most mildew and will sanitize the clothing. Because bleach fades some fabrics and damages others, use other sanitizers, such as pine oil cleaners, as necessary.
- ◆ If an item is still stained after washing, rewash before drying. Drying may make some stains more difficult to remove.
- ◆ Items to be drycleaned should be air-dried and taken to a cleaner as soon as possible.

Furs and leathers are usually worth the cost of professional cleaning. If you want to clean leather yourself, wash the mud off and dry the leather slowly. Keep it away from heat or sunlight while drying.

### BEDDING

Bedding should be hung out to dry as soon as possible. Once dry, brush off excess soil and dirt. Pillows, while washable, usually should be discarded if soaked with contaminated floodwater.

- ◆ *Sheets and pillow cases.* Put sheets and pillow cases through two complete washing cycles. Use diluted liquid chlorine bleach to help kill germs. Follow your usual drying procedure.
- ◆ *Blankets.* Put washable blankets (acrylic, cotton) through two complete washing cycles. Air dry or use an automatic dryer at proper temperature settings. Put wool blankets through a drycleaning process either at a commercial coin-operated facility or drycleaning plant. Shrinkage and the difficulty of thorough cleaning make wool blankets troublesome to wash.
- ◆ *Quilts and comforters.* Wash or dryclean depending on fiber content of the bedding. Usually, it is best to wash cotton quilts.

## MATTRESSES

As a general rule, inexpensive mattresses are not worth the expense of professional sanitizing and reconditioning. They should be discarded.

- ◆ In some cases, a good inner spring mattress may be worth the cost of reconditioning. Get an estimate from commercial facilities.
- ◆ If the outside of the mattress is only slightly damp, brush off surface soil and wipe with a cloth wrung out of a solution of one cup denatured or rubbing alcohol and one cup water.

### **Additional resources:**

Your county family living agent, your local emergency government office, the American Red Cross, the Federal Emergency Management Agency

### **Related publications:**

"Repairing Your Flooded Home,"  
American Red Cross/Federal  
Emergency Management Agency, 1992.