

October 7, 2021

Recent Heavy Rains May Cause Problems with Private Wells and Sewage Systems

Taking precautions can help keep you and your family well



Contact:

Joe Scully

850-481-4806

joseph.scully@flhealth.gov

Panama City, Fla. – The Florida Department of Health in Bay County (DOH-Bay) is providing the following simple recommendations that can help prevent illnesses during and after flooding that may be caused by heavy rainfall events. Precautions should be taken, especially for people on septic systems or who have private wells that provide their drinking water.

“Bay County has experienced a significant amount of rainfall in the past 72 hours. This additional rain on top of already saturated ground has caused localized flooding. Flood waters can pose a serious health risk. Sewage systems and drinking water wells can be inundated by flood waters. Flood waters and flooded wells can contain harmful bacteria and parasites that can cause illness or infections if ingested or are allowed to get into an open wound. I ask all residents to take these precautions to minimize any harmful effects of flooding,” said Sandon S. Speedling, MHS, CPM, CPH, Administrator and Health Officer, DOH-Bay.

General Precautions

- Do not let children play in flood waters as these waters may be contaminated by sewage.
- If you live in a low-lying or flood-prone area, the ground in your area may be saturated from heavy rainfalls or flooding. You should use household water as little as possible to prevent backups of sewage into your home from your septic system.

Private Wells

Private well owners whose drinking water wells are affected by flood waters should take precautions against disease-causing organisms that may make their water unsafe to drink.

Use one of the following methods if your property near your well is flooded:

- Use bottled water, especially for mixing baby formula; or
- Boil water before use, holding it at rolling boil for at least one minute before using it for drinking, washing, cooking, etc.; or
- Disinfect water by adding 8 drops (about 1/8 tsp – this would form a puddle about the size of a dime) of plain unscented household bleach (4 to 6%) per gallon of water, and then let it stand for 30 minutes. If the water is cloudy after 30 minutes, repeat the procedure. Use a container that has a cap or cover for disinfecting and storing water to be used for drinking. This will prevent contamination.

After the flooding subsides:

- Disinfect your well using the procedures available from the Florida Department of Health in Bay County or provided by the Florida Department of Health at <http://www.floridahealth.gov/healthy-environments/private-well-testing/index.html>; and
- Contact the Florida Department of Health in Bay County for private well sampling instructions or have your drinking well water sampled for coliform bacteria by a laboratory certified by the State of Florida to perform drinking water analysis.
- Continue to use bottled/boiled/disinfected water until lab tests confirm that it is safe.

Sewage Systems

During periods of heavy rain, you may be experiencing difficulties with your sewage system not functioning properly.

What should I do if sewage backs up?

- If a sewage backup has occurred in your home, stay out of affected areas, and keep children away. If your entire home has been saturated, abandon the home until all affected areas, including but not limited to carpets, rugs, sheetrock, drywall, and baseboards, have been thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.
- If sewage has overflowed in open areas or streets, etc., avoid these areas and keep children out of these areas.
- Do not have your septic tank(s) pumped if the water level is abnormally high. Pumping the tank in that situation could result in the tank being crushed.
- If you are having problems in areas served by sewer systems, please contact your utility company to insure they are aware of problems in your area.

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