



## Clean up after cyclones, storms or floods

Cyclones, storms and floods can be traumatic events for those involved and there is naturally a sense of urgency around clean up activities. However, the most important part of a recovery operation is the wellbeing of workers, volunteers and the community – the last thing the community needs at this time is a serious or fatal injury. By being vigilant and maintaining safety during this difficult time, you can help reduce the risk of death, injury and illness to yourself, workers and others involved in the clean up and repair effort.

Occupational safety and health [laws](#) apply to clean up activities where paid work is occurring, or where volunteers are working under the control of an organisation that includes paid work (e.g. volunteers organised by state or local government, or a not-for-profit organisation).

### Plan the work

- Think about the tasks to be done and identify the hazards. Some of the common hazards are listed below.
- Obtain the most suitable equipment, tools and personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Ask your volunteers and workers to be prepared in terms of appropriate clothing, footwear, hats, sunscreen and (where there are limited services) food and water.
- Check that workers and volunteers are experienced with the equipment and tools, and are provided appropriate instruction and supervision.
- Have first aid supplies, drinking water and hand hygiene facilities available.
- Identify suitable toilet facilities and let people know where they are.
- Provide workers or volunteers with an induction advising of potential dangers and safety precautions; for example, in a briefing before work starts. Check that people have PPE and know how to use it. Explain what tasks are too hazardous and should not be undertaken, and who to speak to if they have questions.
- Organise work groups to provide a balance of skills and ensure supervision of less experienced people. Consider designating a team leader who has knowledge and skills relevant to the task and understands how to conduct the task safely.
- Identify a person as a first aid officer and let the team know who this is.
- Manage fatigue, take appropriate breaks and recommend people stop work and rest as necessary.
- Remember that some workers and volunteers may be experiencing a reaction to trauma, such as difficulty sleeping and high levels of stress. Encourage people to use available counselling services.

### Electrical safety

- Report fallen, low or damaged power lines to the emergency services or your local electricity distribution entity and stay well away from them.

- Stay away from electrical signs, street lights, electrical cables, foil insulation or other conductive material that may be lying around the community.
- Before working near any damaged electrical installation, have an electrician check that it is not live.
- Stay away from and do not touch switchboards if they are damaged by water, fire or if lightning is close, and warn others to do the same.
- Always use a licensed electrician to do electrical work. You can check if an electrician is licensed [here](#).
- If you have a solar power system, avoid getting on the roof and keep away from solar panels and their cables. Remember, even if the grid-supplied power is out, your solar system may be creating current in your system (i.e. your power may be 'live').
- Never go in the roof space of a house unless all power has been isolated.

## Working at a height

Falls from a height can be fatal.

- Work from a suitable structure such as a platform with handrails, scaffold or elevating work platform, or use a fall injury prevention system.
  - A harness is required when using boom type elevating work platforms.
- Don't walk on asbestos cement roofs as they can give way.
- Use [ladders](#) safely – use an angle of 1:4, ensure it is secured at the top and bottom and that it extends past the upper level by at least 1m. Do not use a ladder on soft ground.
- Make sure others on site are not in a danger zone for any items that may be dropped from above.
- See the [Code of Practice – Prevention of falls from height](#) for more information.

## Stability of damaged structures and trees

- Assess the risk of any damaged structures or trees falling further and hitting someone.
- Barricade off at-risk areas until they can be made safe.

## Demolition

Check whether your demolition work requires a licensed demolisher. Call WorkSafe on 1300 307 877 or go to [Do I need a licence to carry out demolition work?](#)

If the work doesn't require a licensed demolisher, make sure the work is undertaken by people who understand the structure, or the part of the structure, they are demolishing.

Check the location of any underground, overhead or concealed services (e.g. gas, water, electricity) prior to commencing any demolition work.

If a building needs to be demolished and it contains asbestos, there are extra precautions that must be taken, including:

- remove all asbestos before demolition is commenced (if it is not reasonably practicable to remove the asbestos before demolition, please contact WorkSafe);
- if an emergency demolition of a building which contains asbestos is required, then methods to minimise airborne asbestos fibres must be used during the demolition – for example, using a wet spray method.

## Asbestos

- For paid work involving removing more than 10 square metres of bonded asbestos material (or any amount of friable/crumblly material), a licenced asbestos removalist must be used.
- Building materials dating back before 1990 often contain asbestos (e.g. fences, cladding, eaves, switchboards, vinyl tiles and associated glues, and sheeting behind wet areas such as in bathrooms and kitchens).
- Never cut asbestos cement material with power tools or clean it with high pressure water as hazardous fibres are released.
- Protective clothing including coveralls and a Class P2 (Particulate) respirator should be worn during asbestos removal.
- Asbestos cement material should be wet before handling and wrapped in thick plastic or contained (such as in a closed 200L drum) before disposal at an approved landfill.
- Further information:
  - [Checklist – removal of non-friable asbestos](#)
  - [Finding and selecting an asbestos licence holder](#)
  - [Do I need an Asbestos Removal Licence?](#)
  - [Safety alert – High pressure water cleaning of asbestos cement prohibited](#)
  - [Department of Health – Hazards after cyclones and floods – Asbestos contamination](#)
  - [Workplace Health and Safety Queensland – Cleaning or removing asbestos after floods and storms](#) (use as a guide due to some differences in laws).

## Chemical hazards

- Operate fuel powered equipment (e.g. generators, chain saws, pumps) outdoors to reduce risks from fumes, which can be deadly indoors.
- Look for information on any chemical hazards (e.g. labels or safety data sheets, for information on safe use).
- Use PPE such as chemical resistant gloves and safety glasses if you know or suspect chemicals are present in the clean up area.
- Ensure appropriate decontamination of clothing and equipment after handling or coming in contact with chemicals.
- Wash down clothing with water and launder separately if it comes in contact with chemicals.
- If a container may cause potential risk (e.g. bulging under pressure, leaking, or in a precarious position) isolate the immediate area and contact DFES for advice.
- Isolate chemicals from general waste.

## Slips, trips and falls

- Keep work areas as clear and dry as possible.
- Wear suitable footwear with good grip.
- Avoid climbing on objects or surfaces; use equipment such as ladders or step stools wherever possible and safe.
- Provide adequate light in work areas.

## Biological hazards

- Maintain good hand and personal hygiene. Wash your hands well after contact with mud, flood water and contaminated items and equipment, and before eating and drinking.
- Clean and cover cuts and wounds. Talk to your doctor if you get a wound as you may need a tetanus booster.
- Where contact with flood water and mud is unavoidable, wear enclosed footwear, gloves and suitable clothing.
- Take precautions to avoid mosquito bites.
- Environmental conditions after storms and floods increase the risk for infectious diseases. Skin infections, diarrhoeal disease, respiratory infections and mosquito-borne diseases are the most common infectious diseases after storms and floods.

## Fatigue management

- Roster shifts so that workers/volunteers have the opportunity to sleep continuously for 7 to 8 hours in each 24 hour period.
- Rotate shifts forward rather than back.
- Minimise night work.
- Limit the number of consecutive night shifts.
- Provide frequent rest breaks during shifts.
- Provide transport where appropriate to minimise the risks associated with commuting.
- Provide an area/room for workers/volunteers to sleep before commuting home (where appropriate).
- Schedule safety critical and complex tasks during the daytime (when workers/volunteers are most alert).

## Psychological stress

The emotional impacts of natural disasters on workers and volunteers may not come to the surface for a little while. To minimise the risk of psychological stress on workers, employers should:

- highlight counselling services available to workers and volunteers, and encourage them to use them
- consult with workers when setting realistic work targets and priorities for completion of clean up and repair works
- consult with workers about any changes to their roles, work tasks and broader business changes, and where possible allow their input in decision making
- hold regular worker/team discussions on additional pressures/challenges
- provide 'time out' areas for workers to distance themselves and take breaks from demanding work tasks
- recognise and reward workers for their efforts.

## Manual tasks

- Use mechanical aids like wheel barrows, trolleys and earth-moving equipment.
- Use long handled equipment such as shovels and brooms.
- Provide adequate numbers of people to do the work.
- Ensure people have adequate rest breaks.
- Place rubbish skips close to where the work is being done.
- Where team lifting is the last resort, ensure adequate numbers of people are provided, there is good communication about what is required and a leader is appointed.
- Check equipment is in good working order.
- Consider the physical capacity of workers and assign their work appropriately.

## Displaced fauna

- Check in and under objects before attempting to move an object as snakes, spiders and other undomesticated animals may be taking refuge in the dry location. Startling these animals may cause them to become aggressive and attack.
- Do not attempt to kill snakes as most snake bite incidents occur when someone has attempted to strike and kill the snake.
- Engage a wildlife removal specialist to remove snakes from buildings.

## Operating vehicles, wheeled or tracked machinery in the wet or in changed conditions

- Be aware of changed ground conditions which may increase the risk of roll over, bogging or loss of stability.
- Take account of decreased vision due to rain, mud and other conditions.
- Be aware of possible unstable waterways, channels or dams.
- Ensure loads are tied down securely. Do not overload vehicles.
- Plan the movement of vehicles to minimise reversing.
- Keep children away from moving vehicles.
- Use a spotter to help reverse or manoeuvre the vehicle where there are additional risks.

## Safe use of tools

- Ensure tools such as chainsaws and power tools are used by competent operators in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.

## More information

Contact WorkSafe at [www.dmirs.wa.gov.au](http://www.dmirs.wa.gov.au), call 1300 307 877 or email [wscallcentre@dmirs.wa.gov.au](mailto:wscallcentre@dmirs.wa.gov.au)

[Department of Health – Hazards after cyclones and floods](#)

### Source

Adapted from [Storms and floods | WorkSafe.qld.gov.au](#)