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Preventing illness after flooding events

Te Whatu Ora in Te Matau a Māui Hawke's Bay is warning the community to keep away from floodwaters to prevent the spread of gastroenteritis.

Public Health Medicine Specialist Bridget Wilson says flood waters are likely to be contaminated with sewage, which causes gastroenteritis, also known as 'tummy bug' or 'gastro'.

"Gastro causes diarrhoea and vomiting, and there is an increased risk of gastro after large flooding events because flood water is often contaminated with sewage, farm run off or hazardous waste," Ms Wilson says.

"If you do have contact with flood water, flooded property or items contaminated with flood water you should wash your hands thoroughly."

People get infected when they swallow the harmful bacteria, viruses, toxins and parasites, or when they breathe in the viruses.

"This can happen when you play or swim in flood water and puddles or touch contaminated surfaces or objects such as door handles, towels and objects that have been in contact with flood waters."

Contact with other infected people by eating from the same plate or sharing cutlery, contact with farm animals or pets and consuming contaminated food or drinks, can also cause infection.

People should also stay away from rivers streams and beaches for at least three days after heavy rain because heavy rain flushes contaminants from urban and rural land into water ways.

Drinking water

To find out if there is a boil water notice issued on your supply the first place to check is your local council's website.

If residents are on their own drinking water supply (i.e. bore, well, roof, stream) and are not sure of the quality of it, it is recommended that water from these supplies is boiled for at least 1 minute before drinking, brushing your teeth and washing fruit and vegetables.

If you have no power, use another heat source such as a BBQ to bring the water to a rolling boil for one minute. (Note: keep the BBQ outside at all times. Do not bring it

inside the house or garage because charcoal or gas BBQs produce large amounts of carbon monoxide which can be fatal).

If you cannot boil your drinking water, then add purifying tablets or plain, unscented household bleach. Add half a teaspoon of bleach per 10 litres of water, mix and leave for at least 30 minutes or follow instructions on purifying tablets. Store treated water in a covered container.

What to do if you have gastro

Gastro is not usually serious and most people recover quickly without having to see a doctor. If you feel unwell after coming into contact with floodwater, call your doctor or Healthline on 0800 611 116.

It is important that people who are unwell stay hydrated. You should drink plenty of water and other fluids. Clear fluids, such as water and diluted cordials are best. Ice blocks are a good way of keeping children hydrated.

If the symptoms are severe, some people may need to be treated at hospital, particularly the very young and the elderly if they get dehydrated. A person with gastro symptoms should see a doctor or nurse if they:

- Are less than 6 months old
- Have diarrhoea and stomach cramps for more than 24 hours or symptoms get worse
- Have a high temperature, go pale or limp or are unusually tired, drowsy or irritable
- Have blood, mucus or pus in their poo
- Are not drinking fluids and show signs of dehydration, such as not weeing or only producing small amounts of dark wee and/or have a dry mouth
- Have other health problems or symptoms.

How to stop the spread

The viruses, bacteria and parasites that cause gastro can be passed on to other people while they are still in your body and poo. The viruses, bacteria and parasites can stay in your body and poo for several days to several weeks after your symptoms stop.

To avoid spreading gastro:

- regularly wash and dry your hands thoroughly. Use sanitiser if clean water is not available/limited.
- open doors and windows to let fresh air into the room after vomiting
- use household chlorine bleach mixed with water to disinfect areas where vomit and poo have spilled and clean any surfaces and items you use often
- do not prepare food for others until you have had no symptoms for 2 days.