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1994

## NF94-198 Making Choices About Cleaning Flood Damaged Bedding and Household Linens

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Heiden, Kathleen and Niemeyer, Shirley, "NF94-198 Making Choices About Cleaning Flood Damaged Bedding and Household Linens" (1994). *Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension*. 1443.

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## Making Choices About Cleaning Flood Damaged Bedding and Household Linens

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Household linens need immediate attention to prevent mildew and odors after a flood. Microorganisms such as bacteria, molds, and other fungi from floodwater not apparent at the time of the flood can remain on fabrics and other surfaces if they are not cleaned appropriately. Some fungi range in color from black to grey to white or may be yellow, orange, or red. When cleaning flood soaked items, wear rubber gloves for your protection.

To begin the cleaning process, air dry all items either inside or in the sun. (If a fan or electric heater is used to accelerate drying, be sure the process is **safely** done.) The heat and air will help to stop the microorganisms from growing. Once the item is dry, brush with a broom or soft brush to remove loose mold and mildew. This should be done outdoors to prevent the spread of the microorganisms. The remaining cleaning process varies according to the household item.

### **Mattresses**

Because of the thickness of a mattress, mold may enter into the mattress where it cannot be removed. Due to this a mattress that is water damaged or soaked with floodwater should be discarded. It cannot be adequately cleaned, disinfected and dried. A mattress may be reconditioned by a commercial renovating company, but get cost estimates because it may be less expensive to replace the mattress. If a mattress is kept, it must be sterilized at a sterilizing plant such as a mattress company or a state hospital and odor may remain. Most communities do not have such a facility.

If a mattress is only slightly damp from clean rainwater, brush off any surface soil and wipe with cloth wrung out of a solution of one cup rubbing alcohol (isopropyl alcohol) and one cup water to prevent mildew. Dry using a fan to speed the drying process.

### **Pillows**

Most pillows are relatively low cost and should be thrown away as they are very difficult to sanitize. If

you must attempt to clean the pillows, here are some ideas if no instructions are given on the label.

Brush off surface dirt. Presoak in warm water and then pre-rinse with warm water if your machine has a pre-rinse cycle. Wash (no more than two at a time) in the gentle cycle with warm water, detergent, and the maximum water level to assist disinfecting. Use a disinfectant in the wash cycle such as one cup of liquid chlorine bleach (1/2 cup for front loading). Add the disinfectant to the wash water and agitate a minute to disperse bleach before adding items. If items cannot withstand chlorine bleach, use an all-fabric bleach. Use the gentle agitation cycle to prevent matting and shrinkage. Wash for 15-20 minutes. Thoroughly rinse the pillows. Tumble dry, at a moderate setting, with dry towels to absorb moisture and old tennis balls or clean tennis shoes to break up any clumps of polyester filling or down; or line dry the pillows in the sun shaking often to fluff the filling. It may take several hours to dry pillows.

Foam rubber or urethane pillows may be cleaned in the same way, using cool water and a gentle cycle. Wash for 10 minutes and rinse at low speed. Squeeze out excess water and tumble dry on the air setting or line dry. **Do not use heat.**

For down pillows, the ticking and filling may need to be washed separately. To remove the filling, open one end of the ticking and sew it to a muslin bag two or three times the size of the ticking. Shake the filling from the ticking into the bag and close the bag seam. Wash the ticking and the filling separately following the same steps for washing together. Replace the filling into the ticking using the same method as for removing. Generally, down should not be dried at temperatures above 140oF. For adequate drying and fluffing, machine drying is suggested.

### **Blankets, Comforters, and Quilts**

Follow the same process as for pillows (washing one at a time). Soak 15 minutes in warm water. Turn two to three times during the soak period. More than one soaking may be needed. Launder on gentle cycle using a mild detergent, disinfectant and warm water. Check the label to determine if the item can be safely disinfected with bleach. Rinse, and repeat the wash and rinse cycle again. Dry on moderate heat setting or line dry. Line drying may prevent matting and shrinkage to some extent. To line dry, drape the blankets or comforters over two lines distributing the weight and keeping the items off the ground. Wool blankets are dry cleanable, but may also be machine washed (without bleach) using a gentle cycle with cold water. Electric blankets may be machine washed, but cannot be dry cleaned. For information on cleaning heirloom quilts contact your Extension office and ask for the NebFact on Conservation of Textile Items (NF93-137) or FactSheets on Care of Quilts.

### **Sheets, Towels, and Linens**

Presoak in cold water, and then pre-rinse with cold water if your machine has a pre-rinse cycle. Wash in the regular cycle with hot water (hot water can set some clay stains), detergent, and the maximum water level to assist disinfecting. Add one cup of liquid chlorine bleach (1/2 cup for front loading) to the wash water before adding items. If items cannot withstand chlorine bleach, use an all fabric bleach. Tumble dry on regular setting or hang outside to dry.

### **Curtains and Draperies**

Before cleaning consult the care label to determine if the curtain or drapery can be machine washed or if it must be dry cleaned. To clean curtains or draperies that are machine washable, presoak in cold water or hang on a line and remove mud with a hose. Pre-rinse with cold water if your machine has a cycle. Wash in the regular cycle with warm water, detergent, and the maximum water level to assist

disinfecting. Add disinfectant, such as one cup of liquid chlorine bleach (1/2 cup for front loading), to the wash water and agitate to disperse the bleach before adding items. If items cannot withstand chlorine bleach, use an all fabric bleach. Hot water may distort or shrink the fabrics and headers. Line dry in the sun or use the air only dryer setting to prevent excess shrinkage. Curtains and draperies may shrink up to five percent and lose their shape.

### **Keeping Records**

Before undertaking the cleaning task, contact your insurance company to determine the extent of insurance coverage if any and what records, photos or examples you need to keep for proof. Your insurance company may know of businesses that specialize in cleaning water-damaged items.

### **Evaluate Type of Water-Damage**

Items may be safer and easier to clean if they have been soaked by clean rainwater as opposed to dirty, contaminated floodwaters. Evaluate the type of damage before making a decision to attempt to salvage an item.

### **Adapted in part from:**

Munson, D. & Hedrick, A. (August, 1993). How to Save Upholstered, Furniture, Carpet, Bedding. Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University, Cooperative Extension Service.

Stone, J. & Yearns, M. (August, 1993). Making Choices About Cleaning Wet Carpet. Ames, IA: Iowa State University, University Extension.

Herman, G. (1994). Natural Disaster Program for Families. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Cooperative Extension.

*Additional resources from Cooperative Extension:*

EC 88-422 - Household Cleaning and Laundry Products: Which one for the Job?  
NCR 272 Family Keepsakes

### **Acknowledgments:**

Rose Marie Tondl, Extension Specialist, TCD; John Watkins, Extension Specialist, Plant Pathology; Karen Baumert, TCD Graduate Student; Jason McMen, Nebraska Health Department; Dave Winters, professional cleaners.

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***File NF198 Under TEXTILES, CLOTHING AND DESIGN***

***B-8, Care***

***Issued September 1994***

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*Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert C. Dickey, Director of Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.*

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