Clean Up Flooding and Water Damage Safely

Laborers have led in flooding and water damage clean up since long before Superstorm Sandy devastated the coast.

Flooding damages the structural integrity of buildings, so that Laborers cleaning up flooded buildings may face significant dangers from collapsing roofs, walls and floors. Flooding disrupts electric and gas lines, causing shock and explosion hazards that Laborers must avoid. Leaks of hazardous liquids also commonly follow flooding. These leaks may include gasoline and other combustibles from dislodged underground tanks and toxic chemicals such as solvents and lubricants from residential basements and garages. In addition, Laborers may have to deal with chemicals spilled from industrial, maintenance and storage facilities, as well as toxic sewage from ruptured lines and treatment plants.

Changing weather patterns may increase the frequency of such projects, going forward. So it’s important to remind ourselves of hazards and safeguards involved in these situations.

- Don’t enter a building until appropriate clearance certifies that it is safe.
- Also, exit immediately if you hear it shift, indicating the structure is compromised.
- Wear hard-hats, goggles, heavy work gloves and waterproof boots with full steel toe and insole.
- If you smell leaking gas or potentially toxic fluids, leave immediately and report these substances to emergency authorities.
- To prevent ignition of leaking gas or other volatile substances, don’t turn on electricity, smoke or light matches.
- Bring at least two fire extinguishers (UL-rated to at least 10A) to every job site.
- Wear earplugs or muffs to protect against heavy-equipment noise.

- Get help to lift heavy objects, to prevent repetitive motion injuries (explained more fully in “Repetitive Motion Injuries”); don’t lift more than 50 pounds by yourself.
- To clear fallen trees safely, carefully avoid overhead electrical cables.
- Never use generators in confined spaces such as basements, and ensure adequate ventilation. Also, don’t connect generators to a building’s power system without approved, automatic-interrupt devices.
- Wear respirators to remove potentially moldy items such as carpets, curtains and clothing; or insulation in flooding-damaged walls; and to protect against toxic airborne chemical fumes or sewage.
- Thoroughly wash all hard surfaces (including floors, counters, walls and hard, non-upholstered furniture structures) with hot water and detergent.
- Where sewage has backed up into buildings, common in floods, wear rubber boots and gloves, and goggles.
- Don’t turn on power tools while standing in water.
- Consult emergency responders before moving tanks of propane, oil or other fuels.
- Wash skin thoroughly after a clean-up shift, and beware of boil-water alerts: use only clean water.
- Apply antibiotic ointment to any cuts or scrapes on your skin after washing.

It’s vital to protect yourself while doing clean-up work, for your health and that of your family and workmates and to ensure that the project is completed safely and cost-effectively. Your first and most important assignment is always personal safety.
Construction workers have the highest number of traumatic brain injuries (TBI) in the workforce, says a report by the University of California at San Diego.

Every 15 seconds, someone in America suffers a TBI. Every year, more than a million Americans are treated in ERs for this across the country. Of these, 50,000 die and 80,000 more become permanently disabled.

The high number of brain injuries that Laborers suffer seems more alarming in light of recent studies linking concussion and other brain injuries with lasting and often debilitating damage.

Concussion is the most common and mildest form of traumatic brain injury. Short-term effects may seem manageable, including headache, dizziness, vomiting, difficulty with balance and movement, light sensitivity and vision and hearing problems. However, the longer-term effects of repeated brain injuries (RHI, repetitive head injuries) — even if they seem minor individually at the time — can include increased risk of dementia, Parkinson’s disease, depression or violent behavior. For example, patients with Alzheimer’s Disease are nearly ten times more likely to have a history of head injury that caused loss of consciousness than others.

Unfortunately, these linkages are becoming clearer through studies on the health effects of repeated blows to the head in organized sports and military combat. Every concussion cases some brain damage, and a second brain injury can cause further injury within hours or days of the first. Someone suffering one brain injury has a three times greater risk of a second and an eight times greater risk for subsequent brain injuries.

Unfortunately, hazards with the potential to cause traumatic brain injury are plentiful in our industry.

- The most common cause of brain injury in construction work is falls from heights including from scaffolding and ladders. Be sure that guardrails and fall protection are in place on scaffolds and that ladders are in good condition, properly placed and used only within posted limits.
- Falling materials and tools from overhead also cause numerous head injuries. Be careful, above and below others on the job site.
- Electrical injuries from overloaded circuits, unprotected wiring and contacting overhead utility lines can also cause brain injury.

With traumatic brain injury, the stakes are so high — short-term and potentially life-long — that caution is essential.

- Never venture onto the job-site without a properly fitting, properly-rated hard hat.
- Beware of fall hazards and of objects falling from above, especially when working below scaffolding or ladders.
- Remember that electrical hazards are also potential brain-injury hazards.
Repetitive Motion Injuries

Repetitive motion injury is so common that healthcare professionals use dozens of names to break it down, by body part impacted or professions prone to it, such as tennis elbow.

About 30 percent of workers compensation claims are for repetitive motion injuries, which cost billions of dollars annually in medical costs and lost productivity. Desk workers afflicted with carpal tunnel syndrome may be the stereotypical sufferers of repetitive motion injury. However, such injury is unfortunately all too common among construction workers.

Laborers operating jackhammers suffer repetitive motion injuries from the repeated jarring impacts of this demanding work.

Laborers swinging hammers or shovels all day or carrying heavy loads over entire work-shifts are also likely to suffer repetitive motion injuries.

So are Laborers who have to lift heavy objects overhead, including tools and materials.

Overexertion (in lifting and otherwise), bending and twisting are more plentiful than repetitive motion injuries among work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMDs) suffered in construction. However, construction workers are especially susceptible to two kinds of repetitive motion injury: bursitis and tendinitis.

Bursitis is the overloading of joints through repetitive motion, such as lifting tools or materials overhead. Tendinitis is the overloading of tendons (connective tissue from bone to muscle) through repetitive, strained movements.

Cold temperatures, vibrating equipment, long work periods without breaks and carrying heavy loads aggravate these conditions. Unfortunately, all these activities are common to Laborers.

Prevention may be the most effective way to deal with repetitive motion injuries.

1. Prepare by improving overall physical fitness and strength. This strengthens your musculoskeletal system and reduces the likelihood of repetitive motion injury. Lifting weights increases strength, aerobic exercise increases stamina and endurance to ensure proper posture, and yoga or pilates improve flexibility.

2. Maintain overall good health habits including:
   a. Ensure you get adequate sleep.
   b. Eat a balanced diet, emphasizing vegetables, fruits, whole grains and lean proteins and avoiding processed foods.

3. Work with good posture. Keep your feet flat on the ground or the floor and stand upright.

4. Lift by bending your legs, not your back.

5. Stretch before starting work, like a runner or weight-lifter, to warm up muscles and ensure they’ll support your body properly during work.

6. Avoid overexerting muscles by reaching too far while lifting heavy objects or simply repeating the same action for too long.

7. Take regular breaks, especially when lifting heavy objects repeatedly or using vibrating equipment.

8. Change up what you’re doing, moving on to another task on the job, then returning if necessary.

These preventative steps can stop repetitive motion injury before they have a chance to start. That’s important because treatment can be time-consuming and expensive and can impede your ability to work or cause damaging side effects.

- For tendinitis, immobilize inflamed tendons and apply ice early, then heat later. But don’t immobilize shoulders for more than 24-48 hours, as this could cause additional injury.
- For bursitis in elbow joints, place supportive bands around joints.
- Treat inflammation with aspirin, naproxen, or ibuprofen, but always take these anti-inflammatory drugs with food to avoid upset stomach and possible heartburn.
- If these anti-inflammatory drugs don’t help, doctors may inject steroids into areas effected by tendinitis or bursitis; but no more than three injections into an area in a year.
- Once treatments begin to help symptoms, begin graduated range-of-motion exercise.
- For inflammatory bursitis; rest, ice, and elevate the effected arm or leg.
- Over-the-counter pain-killing creams and capsaicin creams may also help.
- Your doctor may treat bursitis caused by infection with antibiotics.
- Your doctor may treat inflammatory bursitis with steroids, but not infectious bursitis as steroids may increase susceptibility to infection.
Stress and diet are bumping heartburn rates, and sufferers must choose the right remedy.

Heartburn is a symptom of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) — the flow of digestive acid, food or bile from the stomach back upward to irritate the esophagus. It has increased by 47 percent since 1990: 20 percent of Americans suffer weekly bouts and seven percent have daily heartburn.

Heartburn can mask serious conditions such as heart attacks and pneumonia, and it can cause ulcers and related bleeding, erosion of tooth enamel, even esophageal cancer.

Heartburn medications are the second most-prescribed drugs in America after statins.

Sensitivity to alcohol, caffeine, aspirin and other anti-inflammatory drugs, carbonated sodas, acidic foods such as citrus and tomatoes and their juices, and chocolate can cause heartburn. So can stress, smoking, hiatal hernia (displacement of part of the stomach into the chest cavity), obesity and pregnancy.

The most common and inexpensive heartburn treatment are antacids to coat the esophagus and keep acid in the stomach.

Histamine H2 antagonists (Tagamet or Zantac) inhibit chemicals that stimulate stomach acid.

Acid blockers (Omeprazole or Prilosec) reduce stomach acid by turning off the stomach’s proton pumps.

Lifestyle changes can also help, even if reflux of bile or food causes acid-reducing medications to be ineffective:

• Quit smoking
• Eat smaller, more frequent meals (which also helps weight loss)
• Don’t eat right before bedtime
• Reduce or eliminate alcohol, caffeine, aspirin and other anti-inflammatories

Medication and lifestyle changes can help us fight heartburn and win.