

August 29, 2011

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Irene Leaves New York

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Lynne Peeples

lynne.peeples@huffingtonpost.com
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Hurricane Irene's Health Risks Likely To Linger



First Posted: 8/27/11 12:37 PM ET ; Updated: 8/27/11 06:44 PM ET

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Hurricane Irene's powerful one-two punch of high winds and heavy rainfall will undoubtedly result in

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dangerous airborne debris, fallen trees and flash floods.

But after her winds die down and her storm surges recede, a "whole suite of issues that may not have been considered" will remain, said Ronald Kendall, director of The Institute of Environment and Human Health at Texas Tech University.

Victims of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Ike know all too well that the lingering risks of contaminated water, toxic mold, weakened structures and infectious diseases can prove harmful over the days, weeks, and even months after the hurricane

winds have passed. But this dangerous reality may not be on the radar of people along Hurricane Irene's unusual path.

While people all the way up the Eastern Seaboard probably heard the staggering numbers of deaths and injuries directly related to these earlier disasters, "some of the more subtle effects may not have stayed in the news for people outside the immediate area," said Kim Knowlton, a senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

One of these potentially unrecognized risks is what Patrick Breyse of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health calls the "soupy mess," which is likely to flow down the streets in heavy populated areas. And dodging the risk of drowning in it may not be enough to stay safe.

Floodwaters can be contaminated by a wide array of toxins and pathogens in metropolitan areas, Breyse told HuffPost. Chemicals from cars, machinery, gas stations, dry cleaners, toxic waste dumps and oil distributors are just some of its likely ingredients. Pesticides, solvents and other household products stored in flooded basements and garages may also find their way into the mix.

"There are a lot of toxic substances that may be stored appropriately -- until there is flooding," said Knowlton. "The risk could be substantial."

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What's more, Kendall's research has found that floodwaters can churn up sediments carrying arsenic, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and neurotoxic lead -- which can later be **redeposited in backyards and playgrounds.**

Then, of course, there is the notorious sewage problem. In older cities like New York and Boston, **combined sewage and stormwater systems often get overloaded** -- even after just moderate amounts of rainfall.

"Storm surges can overflow and shut down treatment plants," said Breyse, noting that a big sewage treatment plant sits near the Chesapeake Bay, threatening Baltimore.

Add to this the hurricane-induced risks of flooded wells and pressure losses from lost electrical power, and there is good reason that residents have been advised to stock up on bottled water.

But drinking the dirty water isn't the only problem. Kids that play in streets full of standing water can run the risk of contracting a skin rash or water-borne illness from microbial agents -- the same reason you shouldn't go to the beach after it rains.

Depending on what is in the water, chemicals can also penetrate through the skin and increase a person's future risk of cancer, added Breyse.

"Given the uncertainty about what's in the water, it is prudent to avoid contact," he said.

Indoor water hazards can be even worse. Indoor flooding or water intrusion due to roof damage can quickly lead to the growth of mold within spaces where people live and work.

Black mold, one of the more dangerous species of the fungi, is known to cause respiratory problems, particularly for people with asthma. New York City, which falls in Irene's path, has especially high rates of **childhood asthma** -- up to 12 times the national average in some neighborhoods.

"This was one of the big problems that occurred in post-Katrina," Kendall said. "It can be very deadly to people that are allergic."

"Children with asthma should not be exposed to mold," added Maureen Lichtveld, who is currently

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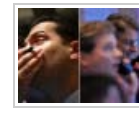
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studying the link between mold resulting from Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters and childhood asthma.

Lichtveld, chair of environmental policy at Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine in New Orleans, recommended either hiring a professional or cleaning up any spots of mold with a chlorine solution yourself. But beware that mold isn't always visible, she added. It is known to grow between walls.

The confounding effects of wind and water increases other health hazards as well. If storm winds blow screens off of windows or doors, and take down electrical supplies, Hurricane Irene may be a "recipe for mosquitoes," said Knowlton.

Standing water, warm air and closer contact with mosquitoes puts people at a greater risk of contracting a vector-borne disease such as [West Nile](#) or [Dengue Fever](#), she noted.

Outbreaks of disease could also result if people are stuck in shelters over a long period of time without adequate sanitation. As Brysse noted, this became a major problem for New Orleans.

"Still, safety is first and foremost," said Breysse. "Even after the fact, there are going to be structural concerns with housing. People need to be careful."

This could be all the more important with Irene. Infrastructure along the Mid-Atlantic and New England coastline is less well designed to withstand a hurricane than around veteran hurricane cities.

There's perhaps at least one health hazard that East Coasters don't have to worry too much about: [ozone pollution](#). With fewer cars and air conditioners running, these levels could drop.

Breysse referred back to the Atlanta Olympics, when a ban on driving improved the air "noticeably." Still, he warns that the inhalation of mold particles could become a concern over time.

"We've learned from past major storms," said Kendall. "But as time goes by, we lower our guard."

Kendall recently visited both New Orleans and Galveston, and noted the devastation that remains from both Katrina and Ike, including boarded up homes and mold infestations.

"It's not like the flood waters just come and go, and people can go back to normal," he added. "For somewhere like New York City, this is uncharted territory. This storm is as big as the state of Texas."

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spkning1sh
122 Fans



3 minutes ago (12:56 AM)

Cheese is essentially mold. All of these people could open cheese shops if the Government didn't regulate everything to death.

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Yvonne Serocki
14 Fans

8 hours ago (5:11 PM)

First of all: do everything you can to be healthy and safe physically.
Secondly, do everything you can to be spiritually safe, healthy, and whole
<http://newheavenonearth.wordpress.com/2011/03/26/how-to-deal-with-tsunamis-and-earthquakes/>
then make the second the first:)

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
Danny22tree *Proud Liberal*
1730 Fans



3 hours ago (9:45 PM)

s pam

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Yvonne Serocki
14 Fans

59 minutes ago (12:01 AM)

Danny, what part of comforting spiritual words are spam? What is underneath your judgment? I wish you well.

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mystshy
38 Fans

13 hours ago (11:53 AM)

what did they think when they moved there???????????????

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tmignemi2
0 Fans

13 hours ago (11:45 AM)

What in holy hell are you talking about??!

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Truth About Mold
0 Fans

07:46 PM on 8/27/2011

Good article highlighting some of the health risks. For additional information about the health effects of mold and other contaminants, go to <http://truthaboutmold.info> and <http://globalindoorhealthnetwork.com>.

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knott wrench

170 Fans



06:50 PM on 8/27/2011

Yep! And this is where the GOP TPer's Need to have their "Feet Held To The Fire" on the Post Damage Reconstruction and where the Funding Comes From.

Crab Eric Cantor will probably call for "Offsets" in the Budget, rather than Tax The Wealthy (including himself) to help pay for this.

And then, the GOP Presidential Crab Candidates. What are their Views on the funding issues.

This is what WE Pay Our Taxes For! Not to be Ignored at Town Meetings or Have our Parents Social Security and Medicare Funds reduced and used to "Offset" Natural Disaster Damage!

What do the Crab candidates offer?

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afinch9

34 Fans

17 hours ago (7:54 AM)

BHO already sent the money to Somolia!

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fourtruth

486 Fans

05:12 PM on 8/27/2011

Isn't it always the aftermath that is worse - but less exciting I guess in Newspeak.

The tragedy still continues from Katrina - and what is happening in Japan? Not news worthy - Like air plain crashes vs car crashes.

Best wishes to all - this weekend and in the coming days and months (hopefully not years).

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f0rTyLeGz *Everything is falling.*

368 Fans



04:23 PM on 8/27/2011

Hysteria! Panic! Get out! Flee! Category 0 when it SLAMS into NYC. Evacuate! Run for your lives!

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

Rodger leMonde *I call them as I see them.*

768 Fans



05:50 PM on 8/27/2011

Please stop evacuating on this thread.

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Kerry Cook

16 Fans

07:27 PM on 8/27/2011

Finally: a level headed HuffPo responder. I hope that the families of those who died from the stress induced heart attacks & strokes (after hearing the media's talking heads shrieking that Irene is "the perfect storm" & will bring doom to everyone in the Northeast for the past week) get to sue the media silly. These media reports of "doom & destruction" headed our way are akin to someone running into a crowded building & screaming "FIRE!" Folks, I live in Southern NJ, where the outer bands of Irene are now hitting & I'm watching a live feed of doppler & satellite data; as a weather geek I can assure you that this storm will be equal to that of a typical, hard hitting summer thunderstorm! We may lose power (as we often do thanks to old wiring & shoddy work), we may endure flooding, trees & limbs may come down, but we are NOT going to crack off & sink into the Atlantic. By the time Irene hits the Monmouth & Middlesex (NJ) County region, she'll be calmer & it will simply be a wet & windy experience. The storms we endured this past winter will prove to be worse than what Irene dishes out to the NYC metro area. Please calm yourselves & those who are scared. The media outlets are feeding your panic so that you will keep tuned into/onto their programs/web sites so they get high ratings. Please keep that in mind as the storm moves closer

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abudotcom
63 Fans

04:08 PM on 8/27/2011

It is not my intention to belittle the East Coast Population, however, I do wonder what the Japanese are thinking about this Cat 1 Storm and the after "shocks" of the storm. ?

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patricksmom *Extreme cat lover*

783 Fans

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06:40 PM on 8/27/2011

Don't really understand how your comment applies. Their situation was a nightmare. Still after reading this and all the possible chemical pollution to come with Eric Cantor in the House claiming that disaster victims won't get aid until something else is cut...I think our country will be pretty well stressed. This political nonsense has to come to an end.

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nytjragn
7 Fans

03:29 PM on 8/27/2011

yet people will continue making pollutants, toxins, etc. nothing will change. once the storm passes, life will go on as usual. it always does. and then another storm will come. once again articles will be posted warning of these dangers. the storm will pass. life will go on. nothing will change. and so on, and so on, and so on, until the sun finally "supernovas" , blows up in to a big red ball of gas and then collapses in to a "black hole". and before that happens, people will still be polluting, inventing cool new poisons to kill the earth with, fighting over "politics", making wars, driving each other crazy and carrying on as usual. NOTHING will change. people will always be the same - until there ain't no more people.

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fourtruth

486 Fans

05:18 PM on 8/27/2011

I see your glass is beyond half empty. Best wishes to you too to find some enlightenme nt - I can spare some from my glass for you.

Here - have a hug.

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Andie Marshall
64 Fans

03:25 PM on 8/27/2011

Here's a Hollywood horror flick: "When the Sewers Backup!" or maybe "Slime, Slugs and Sludge" or even "White Babies, Back Mold" or perhaps Phat Boy Slim of NJ got it right "Get the Hell off the Beach" Oh the west coast boys must be abuzz, the possibilities are near endless.

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Jose 58
102 Fans



03:18 PM on 8/27/2011

No flood insurance? Uncle Sam, here comes the bill as many ask for aid to fix up after the flood. Time to get thoses printing presses running at high speed.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
pepper1311 *POGS are dirt*
129 Fans



04:16 PM on 8/27/2011

Most have taxpayer financed national flood insurance... This is an entitlement that must stop.

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fourtruth
486 Fans

05:20 PM on 8/27/2011

Only if they sign up and "pay" for it - like any other insurance - you are ignorant - do some research.

The only ones that will not get covered by their insurance are the ones that don't have any - those will be the ones "bailed" out by the gov - which won't be much.

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Nancy000
4 Fans

04:31 PM on 8/27/2011

FEMA assists with low interest loans and grants. If you don't carry flood insurance they do not rebuild homes for free. Why do you think so many homes were left unbuilt after Katrina.

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fourtruth
486 Fans

05:22 PM on 8/27/2011

And we are talking about people who could not afford insurance - or own cars - how the heck were they supposed to evacuate?

Has there been any evacuation assistance for Irene?

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
WorkhelpWorkhelp
243 Fans



02:54 PM on 8/27/2011

Slow news day eh?
"water...still causes wetness."


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Mason Wirsig
10 Fans [Follow](#)

02:39 PM on 8/27/2011

The black mold would probably bother me more than the thought of drowning. Water damage is awful.


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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
cjsim *an 86 yr. old progressive democrat*
64 Fans



02:26 PM on 8/27/2011

If the media can't scare us with warning of a catastrophic hurricane then they will try the "catastrophic after-effects". cjsim


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fourtruth
486 Fans

05:24 PM on 8/27/2011

Being a "survivor", if you can call it that, of exposure to black mold I can tell you it causes life long tragedy - and I've faired fairly well compared to many.

These are all important warnings that need to be heeded.


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afinch9
34 Fans

17 hours ago (8:02 AM)


You mean take "personal responsibility" what a novel idea.

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tnash26170
90 Fans

06:32 PM on 8/27/2011

And yet...yet you still watch.

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