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Irene's Toxic Aftermath

August 30, 2011 | Brita Belli | [hurricane irene](#)

Wet, airborne mold spores have meant serious attacks for asthma and allergy sufferers following Hurricane Irene.

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Hurricane Irene—the storm that flooded states along the East Coast, dumping 20 inches of rain on communities in Virginia and North Carolina and devastating Vermont—has left more than property damage in its wake. The storm has given rise to increased health problems that are likely to worsen, particularly for residents of water-damaged homes. Asthma and allergy sufferers are already [feeling the impacts](#) of the airborne mold spores set aloft by strong winds and carried into homes via open windows, window fans or air conditioning units. Those spores act as serious triggers, particularly when combined with high pollen and ragweed counts. In an article by Dr. Clifford W. Bassett, medical director of Allergy and Asthma Care of New York, he recommends keeping windows

closed, air conditioner and furnace filters clean and setting the air conditioner on “do not recirculate” mode to limit mold spore exposure.

But beyond the allergy and asthma impacts are the toxins released by surging floodwaters. As they wash down streets, picking up debris, floodwaters become polluted with a host of chemicals from “cars, machinery, gas stations, dry cleaners, toxic waste dumps and oil distributors” according to one report on [Huffington Post](#).

And floodwaters can bring toxic metals to the surface, and deposit them in places like school playgrounds, according to research done following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. A [study](#) conducted by the Institute of Environmental and Human Health at Texas Tech University found that schoolyards contained potentially health-damaging levels of toxic metals like lead, arsenic, iron and thallium following those hurricanes.

People may also be exposed to [unsafe levels](#) of bacteria in floodwater, which becomes more contaminated with grease, chemicals and fecal bacteria over time. And however good one's intentions to make the most of his/her refrigerator contents, many perishables like meat, cold cuts and mayonnaise last only two hours if their temperatures go above 40 degrees. When in doubt, it's best not to take chances.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration also advises people to take great precaution with any food items, utensils, baby bottles, glasses or dishes that have gotten wet with flood water. Capped drinks of all kinds that may have become wet from flood waters should not be consumed, [the agency warns](#), and cutting boards, disposable cups and containers, baby bottles and other items should be thrown out as “flood water may contain contaminants, such as sewer overflow or feces from the ground.”

Also, they add, your pet may be disturbed by all the crazy weather/loss of power/damage and flooding, and “it may take several weeks before your pet's behavior is back to normal.” [Here](#) are some tips to take care of them, too.

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