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Floodwater may be a health risk

Queensland Health advises that floodwaters currently affecting some areas of the South West may pose a health risk to residents.

South West Health Service District Executive Director of Medical Services Dr Martin Byrne said although outbreaks of disease following flooding were not common in Australia, an increased risk of infection existed if people came into direct contact with polluted waters.

Wound infections, dermatitis, conjunctivitis, and ear, nose and throat infections might occur, he said.

Floods may also increase the risk of diseases such as leptospirosis, melioidosis, dengue fever and diarrhoeal diseases.

“To minimise health risks, do not swim in floodwater and ensure that you and your children keep away from stormwater drains and creeks,” Dr Byrne said.

“Avoid wading even in shallow water, as it may be contaminated – if you must enter shallow flood water, wear solid boots or shoes for protection.

“If your house has been flooded, wear gloves and covered shoes when cleaning up, and treat any cuts immediately with antiseptic. Apply a protective dressing to the wound and see a doctor if injuries are serious.”

Dr Byrne said people should avoid unnecessary contact with mud and dirt, especially when they were cleaning up.

“Always wash your hands with soap and water before handling food, and after handling pets that may have swum in contaminated water,” he said.

Most deaths from flooding in Australia result from people attempting to drive, walk or swim through flood waters. To minimise your risk of injury:

- Do not walk through moving floodwater.
- Do not swim in floodwaters and ensure that you and your children keep away from stormwater drains and creeks.
- Do not drive into flooded areas. Ten (10) centimetres of water will reach the bottom of most passenger cars and may cause loss of control and stalling.
- If floodwaters rise around your car, abandon the car and move to higher ground, if you can do so safely. Be aware of areas where floodwaters have receded – roads and bridges may have weakened and could collapse under the weight of a car.
- Be aware of the risk of electrocution by powerlines that have fallen into floodwater.

Dr Byrne said South West residents also should be aware that floodwaters always disturbed wildlife, including snakes.

He said the best policy was always to avoid snakes and leave them alone but everyone should be aware of what to do in case someone was bitten.

After a snake bite or suspected snake bite, Queensland Health's Queensland Poisons Information Centre advice is:

- Check airway, breathing and circulation.
- Call 000 for an ambulance for transport to the Emergency Department of the nearest Hospital.
- Apply a pressure immobilisation bandage as soon as possible. Apply a firm bandage over the bite site, and then cover the entire limb. The bandage should be as tight as you would apply to a sprained ankle.
- Immobilise the limb using a splint. Any rigid object may be used as a splint: e.g. spade, piece of wood or tree branch, rolled up newspapers, etc.
- Keep the patient absolutely still and encourage them to remain calm.

"Queensland Health does not advise using a tourniquet or cutting or sucking the venom from the wound," Dr Byrne said.

"And don't wash residual venom as it can be used as a sample to identify the snake involved."

For more information visit the Queensland Poisons Information Centre at www.health.qld.gov.au/PoisonsInformationCentre/default.asp

For more information about dealing with floods, storms and other natural disasters: <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/healthieryou/disaster/>

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For further information contact:

James Guthrie
Principal Media Advisor, Rural and Remote
Media Unit
Integrated Communications
Queensland Health
(07) 3836 0961
Jim_Guthrie@health.qld.gov.au