

Aftermath of the Storm

In the aftermath of hurricanes, many displaced families wonder why they can't return home right away. The rains and winds have stopped, but if you ask any disaster relief administrators they will tell you that the problem is far from over. There are many side effects when a strong hurricane hits the coast. What happens when a hurricane destroys services and conveniences that we take for granted? This is where the real horror of the storm comes in.

To begin, think of all the city services that hurricanes could disrupt. To list a few there is trash pick up, waste water treatment plants, electric companies, cable providers, etc. What happens when these systems fail to carry out their job in a normal manner?

We will use Hurricane Katrina as an example to illustrate what can happen when a disaster strikes. As Katrina swept through New Orleans, it ripped a 26-foot hole in one of the levees on the Gulf of Mexico. As a result, water rushed into many neighborhoods and flooded houses up to their roofs. What happened to all of the trash people in their homes and in garbage cans around town? It was most likely mixed into the water. What happened to the plumbing? The toilets and faucets could not be used because the water had risen too high. Even if the victims were lucky enough to have their house intact and not flooded, was their water safe for drinking? Probably not. In a disaster area, there is no way to separate the garbage and human waste from the water like we usually do on a daily basis. The reason why is because the electricity usually gets turned off for a couple of days. Without electricity, water cannot be treated at the waste water facility. Therefore, the water is not safe to drink.

What are the effects of consuming or wading in water polluted with human wastes? There are three main illnesses that are caused when fecal matter contaminates drinking water or food: Hepatitis, Typhoid Fever, and Cholera. Hepatitis A is a highly contagious liver disease that infects 1.4 million people per year. Typhoid Fever, caused by the bacteria *Salmonella typhi*, can be deadly and is very contagious because it can stay alive on unwashed skin for up to four hours. Cholera, caused by the bacteria *Vibrio cholerae*, claims 200,000 lives per year worldwide. The symptoms of Cholera are severe diarrhea and ultimately death by dehydration. The United States has had a clean water supply for almost a hundred years, so these illnesses are nearly non-existent in normal conditions. Unfortunately, in the aftermath of a hurricane, especially the category 4 and 5 storms, all of our ingenuity relapses and we are faced with the loss of basic infrastructure needs.

Cleaning up after these unsanitary conditions is critical. After Hurricane Katrina swept through the Gulf there were about 5,200 incident reports that took until April of 2006 to check on. These incidents include reports of hazardous materials, like leaky gas storage tanks, and unsanitary water conditions. It can take a long time for a city to fully recover from a major storm.

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