

NWSF flooding safety advice document

Version 2



Developed and created by the NWSF Inland Advisory Group and NWSF Comms Advisory Group*. Special thanks to:



NFCC
National Fire
Chiefs Council

*please note that following governance changes to the NWSF in 2024 and 2025, these groups no longer exist but have been established within Water Safety England.

Water safety during flooding (flowing water and surface water)

Check your area for flood risk:

- [England](#)
- [Wales](#)
- [Scotland](#)
- [Northern Ireland](#)

Why is the risk of flood an issue?

Flooding risk is increasing due to climate change¹ and it's increasingly likely that the UK will experience more frequent flooding.

There are growing numbers of community flood resilience groups² across the UK to help communities prepare for a flood³. However, it's vital that individuals are aware of how to keep themselves safe during flooding.

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Facts about flood water

- Flood water is very cold, even in the summer, and you could suffer cold water shock⁴. Also, the water could be faster flowing than you think. So, don't enter the water for any reason
- Fast-flowing water is powerful. At just ankle depth, it can knock you off your feet⁵. In high-risk areas, the depth of water can increase rapidly
- Flood water may contain moving debris that could trip you up, cut or injure you
- Flood water is treated as contaminated by the Fire and Rescue Services. Contaminants include sewage, animal waste, E. coli, Shigella, and agricultural and industrial waste.



Before you set off on a journey when there's been heavy rain or flooding:

- check the weather forecast from the Met Office and pay attention to the advice
- check with the Canal & River Trust for any issues on your local canal or river, and the government's flood warning information service⁶ and updates on river conditions⁷.

Flooded inland towpaths, footpaths and land adjacent to water

- If the towpath or pathway next to water has flooded, find another route
- Don't walk, run or cycle into flood water
- Don't walk on flooded footpaths, even if you're familiar with the path, as there could be unseen hazards under the water, such as debris, potholes or dislodged drain covers. Flood water can break up the surface of towpaths, loosening stones and surfaces, and exposing utility cables
- Riverbanks can be quickly eroded by flood water, washing away previously safe paths. They may also be unstable after flooding has subsided
- If your dog jumps or falls into flood water, don't attempt to go in after it. Stand on the bank in an easy place for the dog to get out and call its name – it should swim to you. If you're close to flood water, keep your dog on a lead.



Road-surface flooding and flash floods

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)⁸ projects that the UK will get wetter over the coming decades. It's not only the total amount of rainfall that will increase, but also the amount of heavy rainfall. This will increase the risk of surface-water flooding and flash floods.

- If possible, don't travel when there are flood warnings
- Carry an emergency flood kit⁹ in your car and have one in your home. If a road is flooded, don't drive through the water. You don't know the depth, can't see any debris under the surface, and don't know how quickly the water is rising. It takes just 30cm of water, up to the wheel nuts, for a car to float
- In a flash flood, the water is flowing. The current will be much stronger than you think and could knock you off your feet
- Even in the summer, flood water is cold. Don't get in the water. Flood water could also be electrically charged if power lines are down
- If your vehicle is trapped by flood water but the wheels are still on the ground, and you can make your way to safety, do so immediately. If you can't safely leave your vehicle, call 999 and ask for the Fire and Rescue Service
- Remember that there will likely be sewage in flood water, so don't drink it
- Stay out of the water and don't allow children to play in it.

During flooding incidents, the Fire and Rescue Service is extremely busy, and its resources are stretched. Call them only if your life is at risk. Don't put yourself at risk by trying to move your car out of flood waters.

Fire and Rescue Services will not assist in the recovery of your vehicle from flood water. Call your roadside recovery provider.

If you fall into flood water

Falling into fast-moving flood water is extremely dangerous.

- Flood water is very cold, and you'll be exposed to the 'cold water shock' response. Don't try to swim – 'float to live'¹⁰ until your breathing has calmed down
- Float on your back with your feet up, pointing downstream. This position will allow you to push away debris
- Use back stroke to help you get across the flow of the water. While on your back, keep your feet and bottom up to avoid any underwater hazards.



Image used with kind permission from Surf Life Saving GB

Never put your feet down until you are at the side. Once at the side take your time to get out and call 999.

Causeway crossing and flooding

Never drive through flood water at the coast. Slow down on wet and winding coastal roads and never try to beat the tide¹¹ when crossing causeways.

- Always check the tide times and heights and keep a look out for the incoming tide. If you're unsure, check with the harbour master if there is one
- Use tide timetables. Make sure you've enough time to return safely. If in doubt, ask for advice locally
- Always carry a phone. Make sure your phone is fully charged
- Call 999 and ask for the Coastguard if you're in danger at the coast or you see someone in danger of being cut off by the tide
- Tell someone where you're going and when you'll be back. They can raise the alarm with the Coastguard by calling 999 if you don't return on time
- Driving through flood water is the number one cause of death during flooding – so, turn around and take a different route
- Always check tide times and make sure you get back in plenty of time if driving across causeways to ensure a safe crossing – never underestimate the rate of the incoming tide
- Listen to local safety advice and take note of warning signs and road closures. If you do get stranded on a causeway, or in trouble at the coast, call 999 and ask for the Coastguard.

Stormy weather at the coast

If the weather and conditions look bad for your trip to the coast, stay at home and reschedule your trip. If in doubt, don't take risks.

- Stormy weather can make our seas particularly dangerous and unpredictable. Large, unexpected waves and swells are a major risk and can catch anyone out
- Beware – the coastline is exceptionally treacherous during storms. The large swell means that areas normally accessible at low tide can be cut off by storm surges. Sea walls and harbour areas can be battered by large waves, and walkways flooded with significant volumes of water
- The power of waves can take you by surprise, knocking you off your feet. In some open areas, waves can take you out to sea
- Stay away from breaking waves and flooded areas – avoid exposed beaches, cliffs, coastal paths, promenades and harbours, where large waves can sweep you out to sea in an instant
- Risking your life for a photo is always a 'no' – don't ever be tempted to stand near a cliff edge especially during bad weather, when they're less stable and slippery
- Keep a safe distance from the sea.

Boats on flooded inland waterways

Boaters are likely to be acutely aware of changes in water levels, particularly if living on a boat.

- Remember flooding happens extremely quickly – be prepared to move early and quickly
 - Check your lifejackets and ensure they are up to date and working- be prepared to always wear them during floods. Ensure you have crotch straps and that everyone including young people and pets have a working lifejacket that fits, with a pealess whistle
 - Read the [Boater's Handbook](#) section on fast flowing water and strong stream conditions (pages 46-49)
 - Sign up for the [Government's flood warning emails](#) and check the [BBC Weather's flood warnings](#).
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Before a flood

- Prepare your grab bag: passport, keys, insurance documents, medication, torch with spare batteries, phone charger and make sure your lifejackets are to hand
- Keep an eye on any safety messages from the [Canal & River Trust](#) and [Environment Agency](#)
- Tie up securely – see page 14 of the Boaters' Handbook - and check regularly as well as watching for changes in water level so that you can adjust your mooring ropes as necessary. You may need to use your boat pole/s vertically, between the bank and your boat, to stop it moving over the bank as waters rise
- Know the exact location you are staying at - this will help in an emergency to identify your location
- If anyone on board is on medication, then ensure arrangements are made to have enough or even remove those individuals to a safe place
- Phone is charged and a waterproof case is next to it
- Turn off and isolate any gas or electricity.

During a flood

- Don't cruise in strong stream conditions or flooded areas
- Check on the Canal & River Trust's [**water level and strong stream warnings page**](#) to see the conditions that may affect navigation in certain areas and the Environment Agency [**Check river conditions and closures: River levels and warnings - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)**](#)
- Take extra care when getting on and off your boat as the verge may be submerged. Make sure gangplanks are secured such as having holes at either end of your plank so that it can be secured by mooring pin at one end and rope at the other. If possible, have a pole/broom handle to check the depth
- If you find yourself in danger and can't safely get off your boat, please call 999 and give them your location
- If you are asked to evacuate your boat by the emergency services please do so, otherwise you may be putting yourself and those trying to rescue you in greater danger
- If you self-evacuate, never drive in flood water - vehicles can quickly become unstable in moving water. A foot of moving water, moving at just 6 miles per hour, is enough to float a car. Two feet of rushing water will carry most vehicles away. Always find an alternative route.



Note on mooring

- If the area where you're moored starts to flood, make sure your mooring ropes allow for movement with the increase and fall of the water, and you have made provision to prevent your vessel rising on to the bank
- If you tie your boat too tight to a mooring that's affected by rising levels the boat will tilt. If it's tilting to the side of the boat with water outlets (sink, basin, shower etc) you run the risk of the boat filling up with water as the flood waters rush in, same also applies to engine air vents. Your boat will sink
- If your ropes are in poor condition or the mooring ring they are fixed to is in a poor condition they can break.

After a flood

A flood can be stressful. Even after the flood has ended, there can still be dangers. Only move your boat when it is safe to do so.

Always remember that:

- Floodwater may be contaminated, especially by untreated sewage and even after the water is gone, these contaminants remain
- Make sure you wear rubber boots and gloves when cleaning
- Floodwater can damage your boat, especially if it has been flowing quickly, is over 1m deep or has been in the property for a long time
- Don't turn on your electricity until it has been checked.



Read the National Flood Forum's [advice on the dangers of floodwater](#).

You need to:

Contact your insurance company and they will guide you through what happens next:

- Arranging temporary accommodation if you need it
- Contacting loss adjusters
- Restoring your home to allow you to return.

Taking photos of everything that is damaged – furniture, carpets, curtains, possession, external damage. Don't take any action such as throwing away items until you have spoken to your insurer, as you may need further information for your insurance claim.

- Providing skips to remove damaged items.

The National Flood Forum provide [a step by step guide on what you need to do after a flood](#).

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Pumping water out after a flood

If you're using a generator to dry out your property, remember:

- Never run a petrol or diesel-powered generator indoors
- Be aware of [the signs of carbon monoxide poisoning](#).

It can be difficult to detect highly poisonous carbon monoxide fumes because you cannot taste, see, or smell them.



For more information on preparing for flooding, how to protect your home, and dealing with the aftermath of flooding, visit RoSPA's Flood Hub¹² and the National Flood Forum¹³.

Always remember to #RespectTheWater

- 1 www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/climate/understanding-climate/uk-and-global-extreme-events-heavy-rainfall-and-floods
- 2 nationalfloodforum.org.uk/working-together/community-engagement-hub
- 3 assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/292939/LIT_5286_b9ff43.pdf
- 4 rnli.org/safety/know-the-risks/cold-water-shock
- 5 www.theaa.com/driving-advice/seasonal/driving-through-flood-water
- 6 check-for-flooding.service.gov.uk
- 7 www.gov.uk/check-river-conditions-and-closures
- 8 www.carbonbrief.org/how-much-flooding-is-in-the-uks-future-a-look-at-the-ipcc-report
- 9 nationalfloodforum.org.uk/about-flooding/preparing/emergency-flood-kit
- 10 rnli.org/safety/float
- 11 s2.chorus-mk.thirdlight.com/file/24/DYiYmaADwR44urDYA9sDZgcFXE/MARITIME-2.mp4
- 12 www.rospace.com/resources/hubs/flood
- 13 nationalfloodforum.org.uk