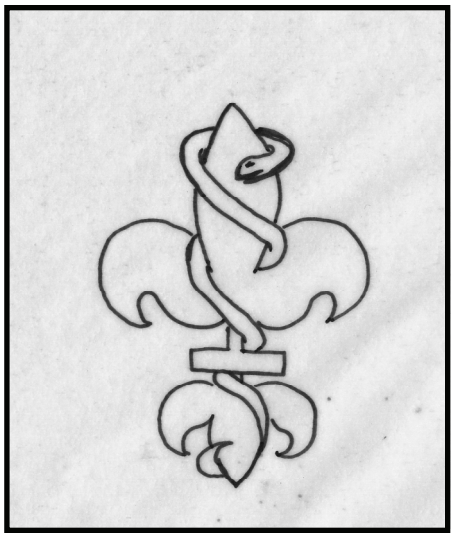
An Activist's Guide to Personal Health and Safety in Post-Katrina New Orleans



A Note From Some People Who Care About You

All of our work is valuable. Whether you are working on anti-GMO campaigns, climate change, immigrant rights, or gutting a house for a family in New Orleans, this is all really important stuff. We need everyone's work to make the world a better place, and we need to be able to do it for a long time. This means working sustainably.

There's a tendency among activists and medics to focus so much on helping others that we don't take care of ourselves and then we burn out. Most people don't do this work for very long if they don't have community support and good self-care skills. We need to care for ourselves before we can care for others. And we need to be sustainable in doing this, because it is very important work, and we know that change happens in mysterious ways, and can take years (or lifetimes) of struggle. We hope to see all of you still involved in this struggle for a long time to come.

Personal Hygiene

The best cure is preventative. Start healthy and stay healthy by being mindful of your personal health and hygiene. Some immunity boosting tips are:

- take vitimin c and zinc
- take Echinacea or Oregon Grape.

  Note: Oregon Grape is not endangered. In fact it grows abundantly in many parts of the USA. It is best to only take these for up to a two week period so that your body doesn't become resistant to it, rendering the Echinacea or Oregon Grape ineffective.
- get enough sleep
- drink a lot of water
- continue a normal exercise regimen

We are all living in pretty close quarters. Cover your nose and mouth when you sneeze and clean and cover your bleeding wounds immediately. If you need any help, find a medic. That's what they're here for!

As well as taking care of yourself, watch out for fellow volunteers. We're all in this together, so don't be afraid to be a resource for others. When we share our knowledge, we all benefit.

Going Out on the Town [to gut houses]

What to Wear *(when doing construction and destruction)*

- long pants
- a long sleeved shirt
- sneakers or boots (no sandals!)
- respirator (for more information on this item, please see page 7)
- work gloves over latex gloves
- protective suit (Tyvek or other) when available

Note: mold can settle in your clothes, so when working in a construction environment, change your clothes before entering a living or meeting space.

- eye protection, such as science laboratory goggles
- boot or shoe covers, when provided
- tie back long hair. Cover dreds completely. Mold is VERY hard to wash out

What to Bring to the Work Site

- WATER! Drink lots of it. You'll sweat a lot doing manual labor. If you are wearing a Tyvek suit, you'll be keeping a lot of heat in while you're working. Stay healthy by taking small breaks every once in a while and sipping water. If you guzzle an entire bottle of water at one sitting, it won't rehydrate you and you'll just have to pee a lot. **Fun Fact:** Your body absorbs one liter of water an hour.
- sunscreen: re-apply mid-day to any exposed skin
- a mid-morning/ mid-afternoon snack, such as fruit or a power bar to keep energy up

Medical Conditions

• if you have any pre-existing conditions such as asthma or an immune disorder, a respirator may not satisfactorily protect you. Even with this protection, your condition could be triggered.

• let the crew leader or attending medic know of any other medical problems you have, or medication you are taking. This way if anything happens on site and you require further care, someone can advocate for you with a knowledge of what's going on.

On the Job Site

• always wear your protective gear

• if you can't wear a respirator due to existing health problems or facial hair, work outside

• before eating, wash your hands, dry them, and then sanitize them

• don't dip your hands into the public serving containers. Use the provided utensils or let a food distributor who hasn't been working in the house and who has clean hands pass out the food.

• during smoke and water breaks, follow the hand sterilization protocol, and don't smoke with your gloves on

Respiratory Problems

Exposure to mold and other environmental problems may trigger asthma, allergies, sinus infections, or a weakened immune system. The most at-risk populations are infants, children, immune-compromised folks, the elderly, and smokers. Routes of exposure to molds include skin contact, ingestion, and inhalation. One of the ways your body detoxes is by using the cilia (tiny hairs) in your lungs to move crud up, causing you to cough it out of your body. Smoking paralyzes your cilia, making it difficult to adequately move the crud out.

In high levels of exposure, the molds (or other volative organic compounds) may irritate the mucus membranes and the central nervous system, leading to headaches, difficulty in concentration, and dizziness.

If you are experiencing excessive throat irritation, runny nose, itchy/watering eyes, or a deep-rooted cough, please take a break from all the great work you're doing and visit a clinic. That's what they're here for!

How Do I Use This Thing?

:A fact sheet about some different types of respirators and how to wear them properly while being aware of the enviromental conditions that exist in the post-Katrina gulf region, as compiled by Iggy.

DISCLAIMER

I am not an expert. I am not an industrial hygienist, a certified mold remediator, an environmental chemist or a doctor. That said, I do have a rudimentary knowledge of first aid and public health issues. I have also been moonlighting doing demolition, painting, construction and mold remediation for several years. In the last couple of months I have re-read as much of the government guidance on mold remediation I could, and attended a brief training.

For more information, please visit the Common Ground Web site where there is a list of mold and flood remediation resources, so that you may evaluate the sources I've taken from. And PLEASE attend the respirator how-to session before going out on work crew.

www.commongroundrelief.com

Thank you, and now, on with the show...

TYPES OF AIR PURIFYING RESPIRATORS:

1. Paper dust masks.

These are useless for our purposes. They will be labeled something like, "for nuisance dust only." People using these are opening themselves up to serious harm by having a false sense of protection.

2. Dust mask-type N95 particulate filters.

N95 is a protection rating that implies the mask filters 95% of particulates. These are often used by fiberglass installers, etc. While not what I would recommend using for house gutting, etc., they are certainly better than nothing.

These masks don't seal very well to the face, so they often do not achieve their stated rating. For doing less intensive work, like cleaning up yards, even moving out furniture, if you only do it once, these masks are better than nothing.

3. Cartridge respirator-type N95 masks.

The mask itself is known as a "half face respirator." These are soft rubber or silicone masks that cover the user's mouth and nose. These masks seal well when fitted properly. With any half-face respirator it is important to get a mask that fits your face and to adjust it properly each time it is worn. Please be sure to read the section below on properly fit testing respirators. There are a variety of types of cartridges that can be used with these respirators. N95 cartridges are appropriate for moderate exposures, like removing furnishings from a home, or cleaning up around the yard, as long as this is not something you are doing day-in and day-out. Many N95 cartridges have a snap-in pad that is the actual filter. You must make sure this pad is properly fitted, or the mask will be useless.

4. Half-face respirators with P100 cartridges.

The P100 filter is a HEPA filter that filters 99.97% of particulates down to a certain particle size. This filter is recommended for very toxic dusts like lead, mold, asbestos, etc. The P100 filter by itself is only rated for particulates and will do NOTHING for filtering noxious gasses.

I strongly recommend that anyone working inside moldy houses, for any reason, wear a mask with a P100 filter, and make sure it is fitted well.

5. Half-face respirators with P100/multi-gas cartridges.

This is the minimum respirator I carry. The ratings on the cartridge you want to be looking for are, "P100" "CL" and "OV." A cartridge that is rated for these substances will likely be rated for a bunch of other esoteric stuff as well. OV, or organic vapor, will filter paint fumes and petroleum vapors. CL will filter chlorine vapors, which is VERY important if people are spraying bleach or mildewcide during mold remediation. There is an industrial supply house near Kenner that sells P100/multi-gas half-face respirators inexpensively. For more information please contact Nancy at Distribution International at 504.468.1800.

6. Full face P100/multi-gas respirators.

These masks offer 10x the protection of a 1/2-face respirator. They take the same cartridges as the half-face masks, and need to be fit tested the same way. These masks tend to seal better than the half-face masks, and include integrated eye protection. These are what are recommended for serious mold remediation (house gutting, etc.). Unfortunately these masks are not inexpensive. Contact Nancy at Distribution International about purchasing these masks. Make sure you read the package insert that comes with the mask.

Procedures for fit testing respirators

There are a few methods for fit testing. The best and easiest involves wafting a strongly scented or flavored, yet non-toxic, substance in front of the wearer's face. OSHA reccommends misting a sacharine solution in front of the user's mask seals and asking if they taste anything sweet. No discernable taste or odor is a good thing.

The method I use for fit testing involves cranking the respirator on tight, donning close-fitting exam gloves, covering the exhaust port on the chin with your hand, and blowing out.
If the mask inflates and does not leak, move to the next step, otherwise, adjust straps and repeat this test until you have a seal.
After you pass the exhale test cap the inlet ports (on the filter cartridges) with your hands and inhale. Your mask should collapse and stay collapsed for as long as you hold your breath.
The longer the mask holds the seal the better the fit - 10 seconds is a good baseline number.

As you work you should be repeating at least the exhale test several times a day to ensure that the mask has not shifted. If the mask has shifted you will have to strip your gloves, wash hands and face, put on new liner gloves and re-fit test. Anyone who cannot get the mask to seal tightly should use another mask and/or not work in hazardous conditions.

Inhalation & Respiratory hazards in New Orleans and the Gulf Region

· *Mold* There are many hazards from mold, ranging from respiratory irritation, allergic response, chronic sensitization to pneumonia, cancer, and neurological dysfunction. Mold spore counts above 50,000 per cubic meter in indoor air are considered very high. On the week of 11/21/05 I spoke to a couple of researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health who said that the average spore counts they were seeing in homes in New Orleans' 9th Ward were 1.6 million spores per cubic meter. With spore counts this high I would like to see everyone wearing a full-face respirator while working inside flooded homes. At the very least people should be wearing a P100 half-face respirator.

· *Asbestos.* Many of the roofs in New Orleans have asbestos tiles. During the storms these tiles blew off and are now (even to this day) strewn about the lawns and streets in the city. As these tiles get ground into the dirt they make fine asbestos dust, which is extremely hazardous. Many other building materials installed before 1964 also contain asbestos. Materials that are a potential problem include linoleum floor tiles, vinyl sheet flooring, pipe and boiler insulation, textured paint, wall board and plaster. Since there is no way to tell which specific materials contain asbestos without sending samples to a lab for testing, I strongly recommend people wear P100 respirators and select work procedures that minimize dust creation.

· *Lead.* Much of the paint used in houses in the US before 1978 contains lead. Lead is a potent neurotoxin that is especially dangerous to children and pregnant women. All remediation work should employ dust control measures, and all workers should wear P100 respirators. Buildings should be tested for lead dust (inexpensive test kits are available at the hardware store - please read the instructions) before beginning re-construction work. If tests fail, then additional dustclean-up should be undertaken.

· *Bacteria and Endotoxins.* Flood water likely contained sewage. Inside dark, damp houses there may be some continuing danger of sewage contamination, as well as contamination from other bacterial toxins produced from decomposing food and such. Outdoors this is probably not an issue, as the sunlight has probably deactivated any bacteria by now.

· *Mixed Dust in Streets.* Flood mud, drywall and plaster bits, rotten flesh, sewage, industrial pollutants (potentially very nasty and it's hard to take enough samples to rule out local hot spots), building debris, fiberglass, etc. Given the unknown nature of this stuff, and the potential for some of it to be pretty nasty, I'd certainly recommend people doing street clean-up, or other dusty work, to wear a P100 respirator. Fine particulates are very bad for your lungs, even if they are not otherwise toxic.

A Few More Words on Working Safely:

There is much more to doing this cleanup work safely than just wearing respirators.

· People should be using Tyvek suits, rubber gloves, boot covers, and/or wearing disposable clothes

· Tyvek suits should be discarded after a single day's use

· Clothes should be changed immediately upon completing work, so as to minimize tracking dust into clean cars and houses

· As soon as possible after returning from work, shower and change into clean clothes

· Launder the clothes you traveled home in before wearing again

· Respirator cartridges should be changed when vapor is tasted through them, or when breathing becomes difficult

· Work boots should be washed down at the end of the day with a strong hose spray (not pressure washer)

· Construction dust should be minimized, contained (with plastic sheeting), and properly cleaned up

· Shop vacs with a HEPA filter are an absolute must

· Moving a family back into a mold free house that is now covered in lead and/or asbestos dust is not cool

· Hearing protection should be used by anyone working with generators and pressure washers

· Please seek training and experienced crew leads so that this work is done in a way that is safe for all involved

· Don't expect that this pamphlet is the be-all, end-all in health and safety; use common sense and seek more information on your own

Weather on Site

Heat

Heat related illnesses can be very serious. 50% of people with heat stroke who make it to the ER die. Doing manual labor in Louisiana all day can be exhausting, especially for people not used to this heat and humidity. People can get sick and die from over exposure to the sun. In serious cases, the person who is sick will have to go to the emergency room or clinic. When in doubt, see a medic or go to the clinic.

Generally, there are two types of heat illness: heat exhaustion and heat stroke. If you feel thirsty, you have already begun to dehydrate. Take a break, unzip your suit, sit in the shade, and sip some water. Some symptoms you should watch for include:

- fatigue
- cool, clammy skin
- weakness
- dizziness
- headaches

if you notice any of these symptoms, report immediately to the crew leader and/or the attending medic.

The best medicine is prevention!

- water
- food
- good coverage from the sun
- rest

Cold

Even though it rarely gets freezing around these parts, in the winter it can get down to 40F degrees, or colder! 50F degrees and sunny during the day is actually perfect hypothermia weather. When you are working hard all day, you sweat. When you finish working, your body cools down, but you are still wet from the sweat, and the sweat cools off to the outside temperature.

It is easy to tell when someone is hypothermic. Some signs of hypothermia are shivering and the "umbles." (stumbles, mumbles, fumbles.) If you are noticing any of these symptoms in you or anyone else, the person affected should visit a clinic for further help.

To prevent hypothermia, dress in layers (you can remove them one at a time as necessary) and stay active. Also, stay hydrated and eat. A tip for delaying the onset of hypothermia is to place red pepper flakes in your shoes, outside of your socks.

Aftercare

The physical and emotional effects of working in the situation down here may stick around in our bodies, even after we leave the projects we're working on. The best way to keep doing the good work we're doing is to keep ourselves healthy and be responsive to our own needs, be they physical or emotional. If you are feeling run down, or sad or angry, find someone you feel comfortable talking with, or visit one of the clinics. There are herbalists, massage therapists, counselors, therapists, and many others who are here to support you.

Detoxing Your Body

- try to drink at least two liters of water a day, or 1oz. of water per lb. you weigh
- dark leafy greens (kale, chard, spinach) are good to flush your system and replenish vitamins
- oatmeal is a stick-to-your-ribs breakfast, as well as a natural calming agent
- a high fiber diet can help clean out your colon
- nettle tea: nettles are the perfect all-around support plant. Their high mineral content and mild cleansing action supports many body functions. Drinking lots of nettle tea will boost your immune system, calm you down, and support your body in returning to its regular, strong self.

Emotional Aftercare

Some people will hold this experience in their body, and it might manifest itself in disturbed sleep, nightmares, anxiety, fear, or depression. It can also trigger underlying stress from past events.

Common Ground has herbalists available to consult with, but for people familiar with herbs, a good formula for supporting the nerves and relieving stress is *skullcap, lavender,* and *oatstraw*. Dosage during times of acute stress attacks is 4 droppers full of tincture (an alcoholic extraction) taken with a small amount of water.

Other things you may want to try for stress, grief, anxiety, or frayed nerves include:

- rescue remedy (a flower essence)
- yoga
- meditation
- excercise
- talking to friends about your experience

Notes:

Notes:

More Information

Here are some useful websites from medic groups around the country. They are full of good information, some of which is reproduced in this zine.

BALM (Boston)	http://www.bostoncoop.net/balm/
BARHC (Bay Area, CA)	http://barhc.w2c.net
Black Cross (Portland, OR)	http://www.blackcrosscollective.org
Common Ground Clinic	http://cghc.org
MANY (NYC)	http://takethestreets.org
STORM (NYC)	http://www.freewebs.com/stormnyc/index.htm

Locations of clinics and hospitals in New Orleans are subject to change (as of writing this, Charity Hospital in New Orleans is set up in military tents in a not-yet re-opened department store,) so I am not listing any in this pamphlet. I would recomend visiting the Common Ground Clinic's website before visiting New Orleans for a more up-to-date information on medical resources in the city.

Who Wrote This?

This zine was compiled by Lizxnn Disaster in January of 2006. She is a street medic and a member of the New York medic collective STORM. She has been to a number of protests, loves teaching eye-flushes and hates riot-porn. She lifted material from resources researched and posted by the Black Cross Health Collective, BARHC, MANY, and the amazing medics doing work in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.