HYGIENE AND EMERGENCY TOILET

When water or sewage systems fail – when not to flush, how to build an emergency toilet, keep your hands clean with little water and handle rubbish, nappies and laundry safely.

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DO NOW

1. If an outage is announced – fill the bath, buckets and containers for the toilet and washing
2. Only flush if the waste water drains away and the authorities say nothing else
3. Emergency toilet – two sturdy bags in the toilet or a bucket, litter on top after each use, lid closed
4. Wash your hands with soap after the toilet and before eating, otherwise use hand sanitiser
5. Tie full bags with little air inside, put them in another bag, store them protected and out of the way

When no more water comes out of the tap or the waste water no longer drains away, you quickly notice how much of everyday life depends on the tap and the flush. With a few supplies and simple steps you can still keep things clean – and that is exactly what protects you from diarrhoea and other infections, especially when doctors' surgeries and pharmacies are hard to reach.

AT A GLANCE

- **Hands matter most:** after the toilet, before eating, after changing a nappy – with soap for 20 to 30 seconds. Without water and soap: hand sanitiser with at least 60 % alcohol.
- **Don't always flush:** if only the water is off, you can flush with non-drinking water from the bath or a bucket. If the authorities say the sewer system isn't working, or waste water is backing up, don't flush.
- **Emergency toilet:** line the toilet bowl or a bucket with two sturdy bin bags, put cat litter or sawdust in, a little litter on top after each use, lid closed.
- **Store bags safely:** tie them with little air inside and keep them protected and away from food until your local council says where they go.
- **A small hygiene supply** is enough: soap, disinfectant, wet wipes, toilet paper, large bin bags, household gloves, period products and nappies if needed.

START SMALL

You don't need a big shopping trip for an emergency toilet and a hygiene supply. Much of it is already in your home. Pick one of these tasks each day – none takes longer than ten minutes:

- **Test your bags:** does a bin bag from your cupboard fit over the rim of your toilet bowl? If not, put large, sturdy bags on your shopping list.
- **Find a bucket with a lid** – one that is set aside just for emergencies. It becomes your emergency toilet if the bowl should not be used.
- **Get some litter:** a pack of cat litter or a bag of sawdust lasts a long time. If you have a cat, simply keep one extra bag.
- **Check soap and sanitiser:** is there soap in your supplies? Does your hand sanitiser contain at least 60 % alcohol? It says so on the label.
- **Set out a water container** with a tap – it becomes a handwashing station.
- **Look at the main water tap and the cellar:** where do you turn the water off? Is there a backflow valve or a lifting unit (sewage pump) in the cellar? Note both under Where's what.
- **See what's missing:** the hygiene items are in the equipment list of the supplies calculator – tick off what you already have.

UNDERSTANDING

In Germany, clean water and working toilets are so much taken for granted that we rarely think about them. It is worth knowing how things fit together once – then the steps in an emergency feel logical rather than like an imposition.

Why hygiene matters so much in an emergency

The BBK puts it clearly: poor hygiene is the trigger for many epidemics and diseases worldwide. To us this seems far away, because showering, brushing our teeth and washing our hands every day are a matter of course. But when the water fails, a lot depends on hygiene – and hand washing remains very important even when water is scarce.

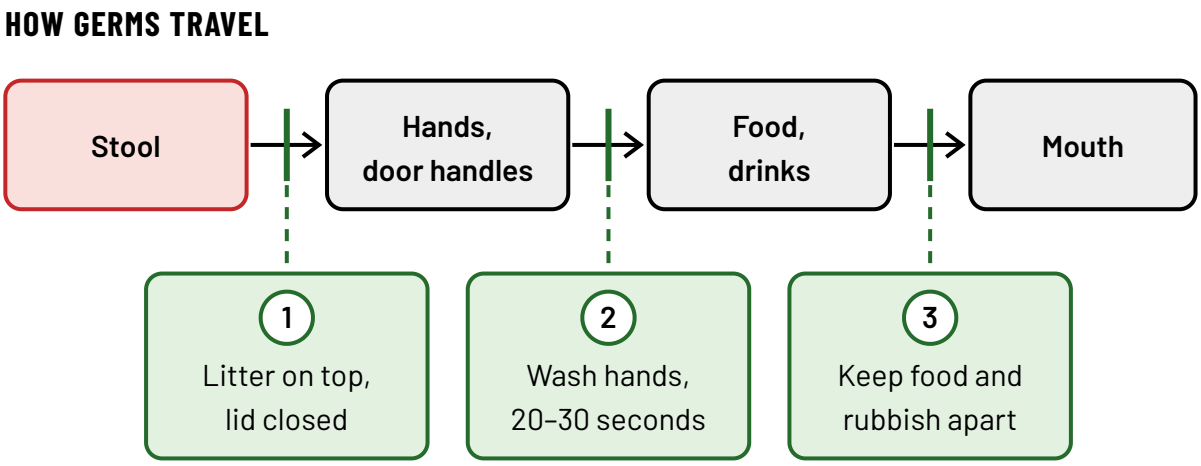
The World Health Organization (WHO) links poor sanitation with diarrhoeal diseases such as cholera and dysentery, as well as typhoid, intestinal worm infections and polio. According to the WHO, around 1.4 million people die each year as a result of unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene – mostly in low- and middle-income countries. That is not the situation in Germany. But it shows what toilets, sewers and soap quietly do for us every day.

The German Environment Agency (UBA) also explicitly names the risks when the water supply is interrupted: restrictions on personal hygiene, no toilet flushing and failure of the sewer system. That is why a health authority weighs up any interruption very carefully.

How germs travel

Many stomach and gut infections spread as **smear infections**: tiny, invisible traces of stool or vomit get onto hands, food or drinks – and from there into the mouth. Toilets, door handles, handrails and taps can also be contaminated (Infektionsschutz.de). Even a tiny amount of stool can contain millions of germs (CDC).

The good news: you can break this chain at several points – with a covered toilet, with hand washing and with clean handling of food and rubbish.



Often invisible: tiny traces are enough

Path of germs: from stool via hands and surfaces to food and mouth. Three points break it: cover the toilet and close the lid, wash hands, keep food and rubbish apart.

When the toilet stops working

There are two different problems, and they call for different solutions:

1. **No water comes out, but the waste water drains away.** Then you can keep using the toilet and flush it with non-drinking water that you collected beforehand in the bath, washbasin, buckets and containers. The BBK explicitly advises remembering water for flushing the toilet when you collect water.
2. **The waste water no longer drains away, or the sewer must not be loaded.** Then flushing water does not help – quite the opposite.

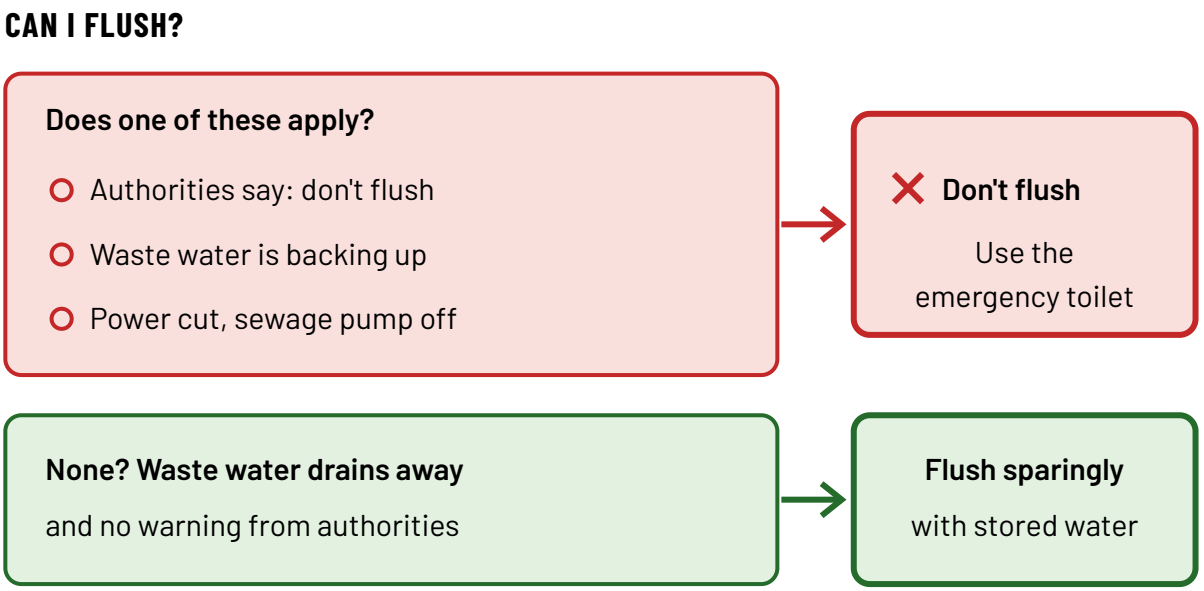
When the second problem occurs, sources from several countries agree:

- **Power cut:** waste water also needs pumps and lifting stations. If they fail, waste water cannot be transported to the treatment plant, and streets and cellars can be flooded (City of Wels, Austria). The Finnish National Rescue Association (SPEK) therefore advises not to flush during a power cut and not to drain water into the sewer until the power is back. How it is where you live depends on the area: some networks work with natural gradients and backup power. So ask

your local council whether waste water disposal will work in an emergency (Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior).

- **Backflow during heavy rain or floods:** dirty water from the sewer can be pushed back into the building (Verbraucherzentrale). When the backflow valve is closed, waste water from a toilet or washing machine below the backflow level cannot drain away – they cannot be used then (City of Passau).
- **Damaged pipes:** after a large earthquake, the emergency management office in Wellington (New Zealand) advises not to flush – even if water is still running – because the waste water pipes are likely to be broken.
- **Instructions from the authorities:** if your council, the sewage operator or the fire brigade tell you not to flush, that applies.

A **lifting unit in your own cellar** needs electricity. A backup generator can make sense for such units (City of Wels).



Decision path: do the authorities say don't flush, or is waste water backing up, or has the sewage pump stopped in a power cut? Then don't flush and use the emergency toilet. Otherwise you may flush sparingly with non-drinking water from the bath or a bucket.

How much water hygiene needs

If a health authority has to shut off the mains, the UBA recommendation says at least **20 litres per inhabitant per day** should be provided, for example by tanker. According to the UBA, this amount only covers drinking, cooking and personal hygiene – **toilet flushing is not included**. This shows: without flushing you manage with much less water. So an emergency toilet does not just save water, it is what makes it possible to stay clean with little water at all.

For your drinking water supply itself, plan 2 litres per person per day. How to store drinking and non-drinking water and what applies during a boil-water notice is in the guide Drinking water.

Sources for this section: BBK "Hygiene in Notsituationen", BBK guide English edition (12/2018), Heilbronn fire brigade (leaflet based on BBK), WHO "Sanitation" (11/2026), UBA recommendation on §§ 62–68 TrinkwV (2/2026), Infektionsschutz.de "Magen-Darm-Infektionen", CDC "Personal Hygiene During an Emergency" (8/2024), City of Wels "Blackout", SPEK (12/2022), oesterreich.gv.at "Verhalten bei Blackout" (2/2026), Verbraucherzentrale "Starkregen-Überflutung und Rückstau" (8/2026), City of Passau "Rückstau aus dem Kanalnetz" (2/2015), WREMO "Emergency toilets".

PREPARING

Your hygiene supply

The BBK recommends that every household should be able to look after itself for **ten days** if possible – water, food, medical care and hygiene. A supply for three days already helps a lot. Under **Hygiene**, the BBK checklist lists:

- toothpaste and toothbrushes
- soap
- personal hygiene items, for example period products and nappies
- bin bags, **including large, sturdy ones to hang in the toilet**
- toilet paper
- disinfectant
- laundry detergent
- wet wipes
- kitchen roll
- household gloves
- camping toilet

On its page "Hygiene in Notsituationen", the BBK adds disinfectant wipes, replacement bags or fluid for the camping toilet, and – as products that need little or no water – dry shampoo and hand-cleaning pastes. For times when water is short, the BBK recommends **disposable crockery and cutlery** so that no water is needed for washing up. The home medicine cabinet should also contain skin and wound disinfectant, disposable gloves, remedies for diarrhoea and electrolytes to replace lost fluids.

The BBK does not give fixed amounts for soap or toilet paper. A good approach: check what your household uses in ten days – that is how long the BBK suggests your supplies should last if possible – and keep that much extra in the cupboard. The hygiene items are in the equipment list of the supplies calculator; whatever is missing goes on the shopping list and comes in bit by bit with your normal shopping.

HYGIENE SUPPLY

Hands and body

- [ ] Soap
- [ ] Disinfectant
- [ ] Wet and disinfectant wipes
- [ ] Toothbrush, toothpaste

Toilet

- [ ] Large, sturdy bin bags
- [ ] Cat litter, sawdust
- [ ] Toilet paper
- [ ] Bucket with a lid

Household

- [ ] Kitchen roll
- [ ] Household gloves
- [ ] Laundry detergent
- [ ] Disposable crockery

Personal

- [ ] Period products
- [ ] Nappies, baby wipes
- [ ] Medicines
- [ ] Litter for the cat

Aim for 10 days – 3 days help

Hygiene supply following the BBK checklist in four groups: hands and body with soap, disinfectant, wet wipes, toothbrush and toothpaste; toilet with large bin bags, litter, toilet paper and a bucket with a lid; household with kitchen roll, gloves, laundry detergent and disposable crockery; personal with period products, nappies and medicines.

Supplies for the emergency toilet

An emergency toilet is quickly set up if everything is kept together in one place – ideally in or next to the bucket you have set aside for it:

- **Sturdy, large bin bags** that fit over the rim of the toilet bowl or bucket. You always need two at once, plus more for wrapping full bags.
- **A bucket with a lid.** Finnish municipalities recommend a **bucket with a lid of about 10 litres** for longer power cuts; the emergency management office in Wellington mentions sturdy 15 to 20 litre buckets.
- **Litter to absorb:** cat litter, sawdust or fireplace ash (King County, USA); dry leaves, shredded newspaper or egg cartons are also mentioned (WREMO, SPEK). Sweden's crisis information service also lists plastic bags, compost bedding or sawdust and a bucket with a lid. The litter keeps the contents dry and the smell down (WREMO).
- **Toilet paper**, household gloves, disinfectant and somewhere to wash hands right next to it.
- **Alternative – camping toilet:** the BBK mentions a camping toilet with replacement bags or fluid. It is more comfortable but not necessary.

A handwashing station

Next to the emergency toilet there should be a place to wash hands with soap, water and paper towels (King County). The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend setting up a **handwashing station with a large water jug** if clean tap water is not available. A container with a tap works well, with a bucket or bowl underneath to catch the water. If water still comes out of the tap but the sewer should be spared, wash your hands over a bucket and only empty it when the power is back (SPEK).

So have ready: a water container, soap (liquid soap is more hygienic than a bar, says Infektionsschutz.de), paper towels or a personal towel for each person, a catch bucket and hand sanitiser as a backup.

Variations for your household

- **Flat:** without a garden, the only way is sealed bags. Plan a protected place for full bags – for example a bucket with a lid on the balcony, in the cellar or a storeroom, away from food. During a power cut, the water supply also depends on which floor you live on (BBK) – so on upper floors the emergency toilet may be needed sooner.
- **House with a cellar:** the BBK recommends protecting the house from sewer water with a **backflow protection device**; a lifting unit can also pump waste water out against backflow. If a toilet, shower or washing machine is below street level, according to the Verbraucherzentrale only a **lifting unit** gives adequate protection; a backflow valve only stops water from the sewer getting in. Both must be serviced regularly. Unused drains in the cellar should be sealed. More in the guide Floods and heavy rain.
- **With a baby or toddler:** keep nappies, wet wipes and sealable bags for full nappies and dirty clothes in your supplies. The CDC lists at least one large pack of nappies and two packs of wipes, plus nappy cream and disposable cups, plates and spoons. Bottles, teats and sippy cups are hard to keep clean without safe water. The CDC considers **ready-to-feed formula** the safest formula option in an emergency because it doesn't need mixing, and **disposable cups** need no cleaning. According to the CDC, breastfeeding is the safest way to feed a baby during a disaster. Which water is suitable for baby food is in the guide Drinking water.
- **With care needs:** the BBK advises making arrangements so that you can care for relatives who need care yourself for a while if necessary, and – if relatives live in a care home – asking there about its backup power planning. Think of the personal hygiene items used every day, disposable gloves and hand sanitiser. Hand sanitiser can be useful where there is a higher risk of infection or contact with particularly vulnerable people (Infektionsschutz.de).
- **With pets:** for cats, the CDC recommends keeping litter and a litter box in your supplies, plus paper towels, plastic bags and disinfectant for accidents; food and water for two weeks. The bonus: cat litter also works as litter for the emergency toilet. More in the guide People who need care, and pets.

Sources for this section: BBK guide with checklist (11/2025), BBK "Hygiene in Notsituationen", BBK "Stromausfall" (2026), BBK "Empfehlungen bei Hochwasser" (2024), Krisinformation.se (11/2026),

Heilbronn fire brigade (leaflet based on BBK), Yle/Association of Finnish Municipalities (4/2025), WREMO "Emergency toilets", King County "How to create an emergency toilet", SPEK (12/2022), CDC (2022, 2024, 2026), Infektionsschutz.de "Händewaschen" (6/2025), Verbraucherzentrale (8/2026).

IN AN EMERGENCY

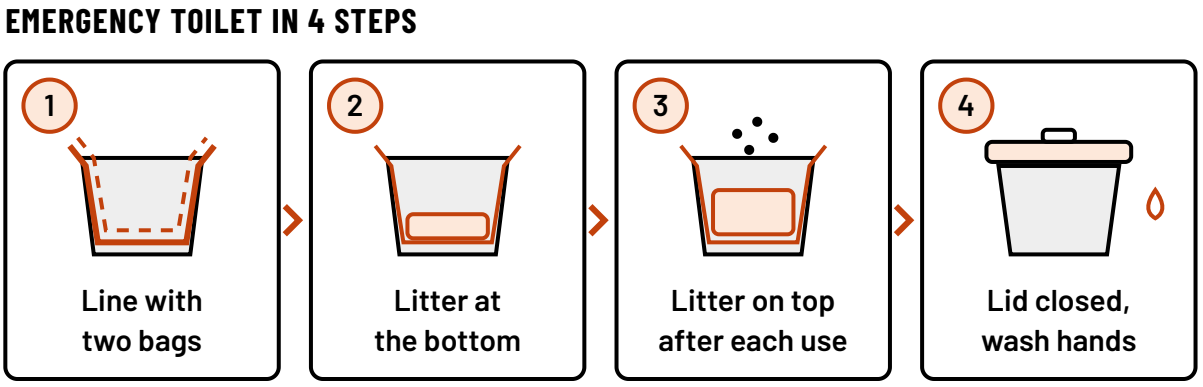
When the water fails – the first steps

1. **Get informed:** switch on the radio or a warning app. Your water supplier, council and sewage operator will say whether water and sewers are affected. Their instructions come first.
2. **Collect water while it is running:** if a longer outage is announced, fill the bath, washbasin, buckets, pots and containers – as non-drinking water for hygiene and for flushing the toilet (BBK).
3. **Save water:** disposable crockery instead of washing up, wet wipes and disinfectant wipes for hands, kitchen roll instead of a wet cloth, household gloves for cleaning (BBK).
4. **Flush or not?** As described under "Understanding": if the waste water drains away and nobody says otherwise, you may flush with non-drinking water. With backflow, failed sewage pumps or on instruction: don't flush, use the emergency toilet.
5. **During a short power cut:** you can still sit on the toilet. Put used toilet paper in a bin bag so the bowl doesn't block; flush only when the power is back (SPEK).

Setting up an emergency toilet – step by step

This is how the public health department of King County (USA), the Finnish rescue association SPEK and the emergency management office in Wellington describe it – the steps largely match:

1. **Choose a place:** the normal toilet or a bucket in the bathroom – not near the kitchen or where you eat.
2. **Line it twice:** line the toilet bowl or bucket with **two sturdy bin bags**.
3. **Litter at the bottom:** put cat litter, sawdust or shredded newspaper in the bottom of the bags.
4. **Cover after each use:** a handful or a large cupful of litter on top. This keeps the contents dry and the smell down.
5. **Lid closed:** keep the lid and the door closed between uses.
6. **Wash your hands:** straight afterwards at the handwashing station or with hand sanitiser.
7. **Always supervise small children** on the emergency toilet (King County).



Away from kitchen and dining area
Always supervise small children

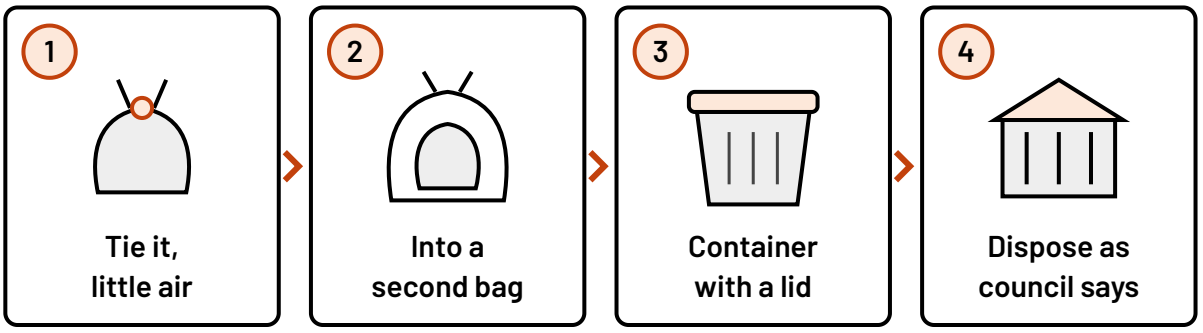
Emergency toilet in four steps: 1. two sturdy bags in the bowl or bucket, 2. litter at the bottom, 3. a handful of litter on top after each use, 4. lid closed and wash hands.

Bucket instead of the toilet bowl: for longer power cuts, Finnish municipalities now recommend a bucket with a lid rather than a bag in the toilet. The reason: the bag can slip into the drain or tear when you lift it out. A bucket is also the right choice if the bathroom can't be reached or the toilet should not be used because of backflow.

Sealing and storing full bags

1. **Don't let them get too full:** a bag can tear when you lift it out (Association of Finnish Municipalities) – the less is in it, the more safely you can lift it out and tie it.
2. **Gloves on:** wear household or disposable gloves when changing bags (WREMO).
3. **Tie with little air inside**, and close the outer bag too. The Finnish rescue association advises putting the sealed bag into **two more plastic bags**.
4. **At the end of each day at the latest**, tie the bags securely and move them to a protected place – for example a garage, cellar or shed (King County).
5. **Keep them separate:** don't mix toilet bags with other household rubbish (WREMO); collect them in their own container with a lid so that neither animals nor pests can get to them.
6. **Dispose of them as your council says:** in Finland the bags go in the general waste, in New Zealand in a bin with a lid; in the USA they may go in household rubbish if the authorities announce it. Where you live: listen for announcements and ask your council or waste service. Rubbish collection may stop at short notice in a crisis (Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior) – so plan space for a few days.
7. **Afterwards wash your hands**, rinse the bucket and disinfect it if needed (WREMO).

FULL BAGS: WHAT NEXT



Apart from other rubbish, away from food
Wear gloves, then wash your hands

Full bags: 1. tie with little air inside, 2. put in a second bag, 3. into a container with a lid in a protected place, separate from household rubbish, 4. dispose of as the council says.

Variation: two buckets

After earthquakes, the emergency management office in Wellington recommends a **two-bucket system**: one bucket for urine, one for stool. Kept apart, it smells less and is safer. Label the buckets clearly. Stool, toilet paper and litter go in the stool bucket; in a flat it is lined with a sturdy bag. There, the urine bucket is emptied daily and the stool bucket about every three days or sooner. Where you are allowed to put urine and bags in your area depends on whether sewers and rubbish collection are working – if in doubt, ask.

Washing your hands with little water

When: Infektionsschutz.de names the most important moments: after the toilet, after changing a nappy or helping a child on the toilet, after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing, after contact with rubbish, animals, pet food or animal waste – before eating and before handling medicines – and before and after preparing food, contact with sick people and caring for wounds.

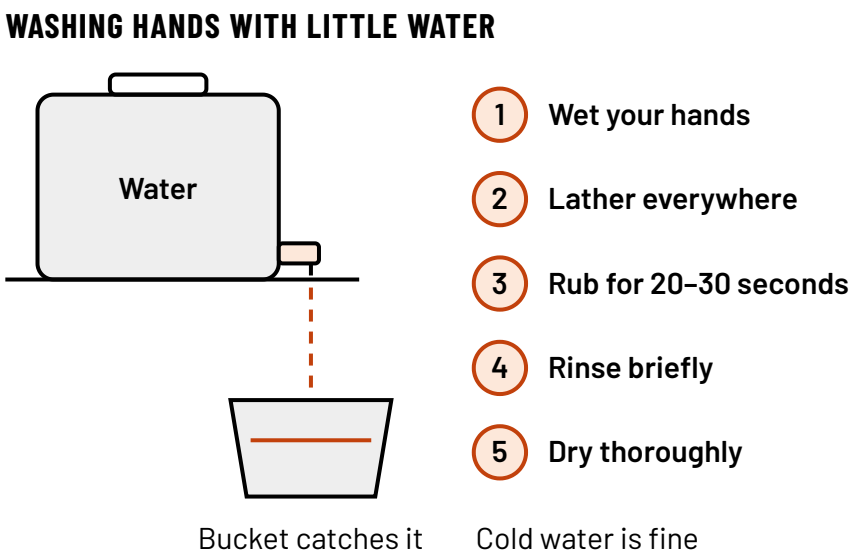
How – at a station with a water container:

1. **Wet:** let a little water from the container run over your hands, with a catch bucket underneath.
2. **Lather thoroughly:** palms, backs of hands, fingertips, between the fingers, thumbs and nails.
3. **Rub gently for 20 to 30 seconds** – about as long as humming a well-known birthday song twice.
4. **Rinse** with a small splash of water.
5. **Dry thoroughly**, including between the fingers – with a paper towel or your own clean towel.

The water temperature makes no difference; cold water is fine. Soap is much more effective than water alone. If you have no soap, still wash your hands with water – that also removes some germs. Change towels regularly and wash them at 60 °C or more (Infektionsschutz.de).

During a boil-water notice, washing hands with tap water may be safe (CDC); the UBA then advises thorough hand washing with plenty of soap. What else applies during a boil-water notice is in the guide

Drinking water.



Washing hands with little water at a container with a tap and a catch bucket: 1. wet, 2. lather, 3. rub for 20 to 30 seconds, 4. rinse, 5. dry.

Soap or hand sanitiser?

Soap and water are the first choice in most situations because they remove all types of germs from hands. **Hand sanitiser** is the answer when soap and water are not available (CDC):

- **At least 60 % alcohol** – it says so on the label.
- **How to use it:** put the amount given on the pack into the palm of one hand, spread it over all surfaces of both hands and rub until your hands are dry – about 20 seconds. Don't wipe or rinse it off before it has dried.
- **Works poorly on visibly dirty or greasy hands.** Remove the dirt first – with soap and water or, when out and about, with cleaning wipes (Infektionsschutz.de, CDC).
- **Less effective against** norovirus, the parasite *Cryptosporidium* and the diarrhoea germ *Clostridioides difficile* – so with vomiting and diarrhoea in the household, pay special attention to soap and water.
- **Does not remove chemicals** such as pesticides or heavy metals.
- **Supervise children** so they don't swallow it.

SOAP OR HAND SANITISER?

Soap and water

First choice whenever possible

Especially with:

- visibly dirty, greasy hands
- diarrhoea in the household
- after chemicals

Hand sanitiser

If soap and water are lacking

- at least 60 % alcohol
- rub over all surfaces
- about 20 seconds
- until dry, don't wipe off

⚠ Supervise children: don't swallow

Soap or sanitiser: soap and water whenever possible, especially with visible dirt, grease, diarrhoea in the household and after contact with chemicals. Hand sanitiser with at least 60 percent alcohol when soap and water are not available, rub in for about 20 seconds until hands are dry.

Washing, teeth, hair

- **Body:** instead of a shower, a flannel, a bowl and soap are enough – non-drinking water from the bath or a bucket is fine for hygiene as long as it isn't contaminated (BBK). Without water, wet wipes, dry shampoo and hand-cleaning paste help (BBK).
- **No water with sewage or chemicals:** don't wash or bathe in water that may be contaminated with sewage, toxic substances or floodwater (CDC).
- **Teeth:** only with clean water – drinking water from your supply or, during a boil-water notice, boiled water (CDC, UBA).
- **During a boil-water notice**, personal hygiene with tap water is possible; cover open wounds with a waterproof plaster. For young children and for sick people or people with weakened immunity, boiled and cooled water should also be used for personal hygiene (UBA). Careful – risk of scalding!
- **Own flannels and towels** for each person; wash at 60 °C or more in case of illness (Infektionsschutz.de).

Periods

Pads, tampons and panty liners belong in your supplies (BBK) and, after use, in the general waste – **not in the toilet**, because they can block the drain and the backflow valve (Verbraucherzentrale, WREMO). Collect them in a separate small bag and close it well. Empty a menstrual cup into the stool bucket of the emergency toilet (WREMO). Wash or disinfect your hands before and after.

Changing nappies

The CDC describes how to do this cleanly even without a changing table and running water. Important: **always keep one hand on the child.**

1. **Prepare:** if possible, cover the surface with a disposable liner. Have a fresh nappy, wipes, cream, a bag for dirty clothes and spare clothes ready.
2. **Clean the child:** with wipes or a clean, damp cloth – always **from front to back**. Put dirty clothes straight into the bag.
3. **Dispose:** put used wipes in the dirty nappy and everything in the bin – tightly closed, away from food.
4. **Fresh nappy** on, dress the child.
5. **Child's hands:** wash with soap and water – without a washing facility, use hand sanitiser, keep hands away from eyes and mouth until dry, and wash with soap later.
6. **Clean up:** remove the liner, wipe off visible dirt, wet the surface with disinfectant following the instructions on the pack.
7. **Your own hands:** wash them – or use sanitiser and wash with soap as soon as possible.

Nappies and wet wipes never go in the toilet (Verbraucherzentrale).

Dishes and laundry

- **Dishes:** when water is short, use disposable crockery and cutlery, and clean plates and work surfaces with kitchen roll instead of a wet cloth (BBK). During a boil-water notice, the dishwasher may be used if it can be set to 60 °C or dries with heat (UBA). If someone has diarrhoea, wash their dishes as hot as possible in the dishwasher (Infektionsschutz.de).
- **Laundry:** laundry detergent belongs in your supplies (BBK). During a boil-water notice, the washing machine is fine at 40 °C or more (UBA). Wash bedding, towels and flannels of sick people at 60 °C or more (Infektionsschutz.de). During backflow, don't use a washing machine below the backflow level (City of Passau). Keep dirty clothes in a closed bag until they can be washed (CDC).

Rubbish and pests

If rubbish collection stops, rubbish stays in the house longer. So produce as little waste as possible and use consumables sparingly (Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior). Bin bags help you pack rubbish quickly, even if it isn't collected for a while (BBK).

- **Collect separately:** toilet bags apart from other rubbish (WREMO). Nappies and hygiene products in their own tightly closed bags.
- **Food scraps** go in the household waste, not left lying around and **never down the toilet or sink** – that attracts rats (City of Heidelberg).
- **Close everything well:** keep bins, rubbish bags and pet food tightly closed (City of Heidelberg); keep the emergency toilet lid shut so that flies and rodents can't get in (King County).
- **Away from food:** store it in a protected place.

RUBBISH: SEPARATE AND SEALED



✗ None of it down toilet or sink

✓ Lids closed, away from food

Collect rubbish separately and sealed: toilet bags double-bagged in their own container with a lid, nappies and hygiene products in their own bags, food scraps sealed in the household waste. None of it down the toilet or sink.

Wounds and medicines

- **Before handling medicines** and **before and after caring for wounds**, wash your hands (Infektionsschutz.de) – or disinfect them and use disposable gloves from the medicine cabinet.
- **Clean wounds** with soap and clean water and cover them with a waterproof plaster; during a boil-water notice, use boiled or bottled water for this (CDC, UBA).
- **With open wounds**, stay out of floodwater (CDC).
- **Get medical help** if a wound becomes red, swollen or starts to ooze (CDC).

How to treat injuries is in the guide First aid – which, by the way, is no substitute for a first aid course.

If someone gets diarrhoea

Especially when water is short, it pays to slow down an infection in the household early. Infektionsschutz.de advises:

1. **Hands:** the sick person washes their hands often and thoroughly.
2. **Own toilet:** if possible, use a toilet and bedroom separate from healthy people – with an emergency toilet this means a bucket of their own if possible.
3. **Clean up quickly:** remove vomit and traces of stool promptly, ideally with gloves. Then clean thoroughly.
4. **No cooking:** sick people don't prepare food for others.
5. **Drink plenty:** ideally lightly salted tea or broth in small sips. Electrolytes from the medicine cabinet help replace lost fluids (BBK).
6. **Get medical advice** for babies, toddlers, older people and people with weakened immunity – for them, lack of fluids quickly becomes dangerous. For everyone: with severe circulation

problems, muscle cramps, drowsiness, confusion, high fever, blood in the stool or vomiting and diarrhoea lasting more than three days. Emergency number 112, out-of-hours doctor service 116 117.

Sources for this section: King County "How to create an emergency toilet", SPEK (12/2022), WREMO "Emergency toilets", Yle/Association of Finnish Municipalities (4/2025), BBK "Hygiene in Notsituationen", BBK guide (11/2025), BBK guide English edition (12/2018), oesterreich.gv.at (2/2026), Infektionsschutz.de "Händewaschen" (6/2025) and "Magen-Darm-Infektionen", CDC "Personal Hygiene During an Emergency" (8/2024), CDC "Hand Sanitizer" (3/2024), CDC nappy changing (2/2022), UBA (2/2026), Verbraucherzentrale (8/2026), City of Passau (2/2015), City of Heidelberg (6/2026).

AFTERWARDS

When water and sewers are running again

1. **Wait for the all-clear first:** flush and drain water into the sewer only when the power is back or the authorities allow it (SPEK). Then you can pour the water from the catch bucket down the drain.
2. **Dispose of full bags** – as your council or waste service announces.
3. **Clean bucket and toilet:** rinse with gloves on, clean and disinfect if needed (WREMO). Then wash your hands.
4. **Catch up on laundry:** towels, flannels and bedding – those of sick people at 60 °C or more (Infektionsschutz.de).
5. **Check the cellar:** if there was backflow, have the backflow valve and lifting unit checked; both must be serviced regularly (Verbraucherzentrale). After flooding, the guide Floods and heavy rain helps.

Restocking

Whatever was used up – bags, litter, soap, disinfectant, wet wipes, toilet paper – goes on the shopping list. In the supplies calculator you can tick off what is back.

Learning from it

Sit down together briefly after a few days: did the emergency toilet work? Were there enough bags, and where did they go? Was there somewhere to wash hands everywhere? Did everyone know where the bucket, litter and disinfectant are? Improving one thing is enough – for example getting a second bucket with a lid or a water container with a tap.

Sources for this section: SPEK (12/2022), WREMO "Emergency toilets", Infektionsschutz.de "Magen-Darm-Infektionen", Verbraucherzentrale (8/2026).

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Flushing although the waste water is backed up:** with backflow or failed sewage pumps, the water ends up in the cellar – or your neighbour's.
- **Using only one thin bag:** always two sturdy bags – one on its own tears easily.
- **Letting bags get too full:** then they can hardly be lifted out and tied safely.
- **Forgetting the litter:** without litter it gets wet and smells.
- **Putting toilet bags with the kitchen rubbish:** store them separately, sealed and away from food.
- **Throwing wet wipes, nappies or pads into the toilet:** they block the drain and the backflow valve.
- **Tipping food scraps into the toilet:** that attracts rats.
- **Sanitiser on dirty hands:** remove the dirt first, then disinfect.
- **Only sanitiser during vomiting and diarrhoea:** soap and water work better against norovirus.
- **Brushing teeth with non-drinking water:** use only clean drinking water for that.
- **Leaving small children alone on the emergency toilet.**

CHECKLIST

- [ ] Large, sturdy bin bags that fit over the toilet bowl
- [ ] Bucket with a lid (about 10 to 20 litres) for the emergency toilet
- [ ] Litter: cat litter or sawdust
- [ ] Toilet paper
- [ ] Soap, preferably liquid soap
- [ ] Hand sanitiser with at least 60 % alcohol
- [ ] Wet wipes and disinfectant wipes
- [ ] Household gloves and disposable gloves
- [ ] Kitchen roll and disposable crockery
- [ ] Toothbrushes and toothpaste
- [ ] Laundry detergent
- [ ] Period products
- [ ] With a baby: nappies, wet wipes, bags for full nappies, disposable cups
- [ ] With care needs: personal hygiene items for care, disposable gloves
- [ ] With a cat: litter and litter box
- [ ] Water container with a tap, catch bucket, paper towels as a handwashing station
- [ ] Water containers for non-drinking water (toilet, washing)
- [ ] Protected place for full bags decided

- [ ] Backflow valve or lifting unit in the cellar known and serviced
- [ ] Main water tap found, location noted under Where's what
- [ ] Numbers of council, waste service and sewage operator on paper

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