

Bathroom & Hygiene Without Running Water

The Sanitation & Hygiene chapter names these as Tier 1 and Tier 2 skills to build (sponge bathing, a bucket toilet) in one line each. This guide is the actual how-to: exact setup, materials, quantities, and disposal steps for going to the bathroom, bathing, washing hands, washing dishes, and doing laundry, including drying it, when there's no running water at all.

Why this matters more than it sounds like it should

The manual's own framing bears repeating here: disease, not the disaster itself, is the leading cause of death in the days and weeks that follow most emergencies. Contaminated hands and mismanaged human waste are the two biggest drivers of that risk, and both are fully preventable with cheap materials and the right technique. This isn't a comfort issue, it's a survival one.

Setting up a toilet with no running water

The core method is the same whether you use your existing toilet bowl or a separate bucket: a sealed liner, an absorbent cover material, and a clear disposal plan. Don't wait until the water is actually off to figure this out.

Materials

Item	Spec	Notes
Container	5-gallon bucket, or your existing toilet bowl	A snap-on toilet-seat attachment makes a bucket far more usable, but isn't required
Liners	Two heavy-duty plastic garbage bags, one inside the other	Double-bagging is the standard recommendation; a single bag tears more easily under weight
Cover material	Cat litter, wood ash, or sawdust	Crushed dry leaves, shredded cardboard/paper, or small wood chips all work as a backup if none of the above is on hand
Disposal container	30-gallon garbage can with a tight, secured lid	For temporary storage until real disposal is possible

Setup and use

1. Line the bowl or bucket with two heavy-duty garbage bags, one inside the other.
2. Add a base layer, roughly a 1-inch layer of cat litter, ash, or sawdust, in the bottom of the inner bag before first use.
3. After each use, add about **2 cups** of the same cover material. This single habit does most of the work of controlling both odor and disease risk, don't skip it to save material.
4. Keep the lid or seat cover closed between uses to keep out flies and pests.
5. When the inner bag is full or needs changing, seal it tightly, insert a fresh liner, and add a new base layer for the next use.

A two-bucket system, if you're planning ahead

Separating liquid and solid waste into two buckets cuts down on both volume and odor. Empty the urine-only bucket after each use over a lawn or gravel area, where it evaporates and soaks in; rinse the bucket to reuse. Route solid waste into the second bucket using the liner-and-cover method above. This is more setup than a single bucket, but it fills far more slowly and smells far less.

Adapting an existing toilet

If your home's toilet still has a bowl but no water to flush it: turn off the water supply to the toilet, empty the tank and bowl, and plug the drain hole with a rubber ball wrapped in a sock (or a similar improvised plug) so sewer gas doesn't rise back up. Line the bowl the same way as a bucket, two heavy-duty bags, cover material after every use. This keeps the household using a familiar fixture instead of a bucket on the floor, which matters more than it sounds like it would, especially for kids and older adults.

Treating waste, not just containing it

Cover material controls odor, but on its own it doesn't destroy the pathogens that make human waste dangerous, containment and treatment are two different jobs. If you want real pathogen kill before disposal, not just after a long wait, hydrated lime is the fast, low-equipment option:

1. Buy **hydrated lime (calcium hydroxide)** specifically, a different, higher-strength product than the agricultural lime sometimes used as cover material. Store it separately and label it clearly so the two don't get mixed up.
2. Stir in roughly **1–2 cups of hydrated lime per 5-gallon bucket** of waste.
3. Let it sit, sealed, for at least **2 hours** before disposal. This is enough time at the resulting pH (above 12) to destroy the bacteria and viruses behind most disaster-related outbreaks.

4. Wear **gloves, a mask, and eye protection** while handling it. Hydrated lime is caustic, treat it with the same care as any corrosive cleaning chemical, and keep it away from kids and pets.

WARNING**What actually works, and what doesn't**

A light dusting of ordinary cover-material lime or kitty litter controls odor; it isn't a treatment dose and shouldn't be relied on to kill pathogens. An improvised backyard burn doesn't reach the sustained, even, oxygen-limited heat true pyrolysis needs, cool pockets let hardy organisms survive. And some resistant pathogens, notably the parasite in cat waste covered in the Household Trash & Pet Waste Disposal guide, aren't reliably killed by standard chemical disinfectants like bleach, so don't assume a method that works here automatically works there. When a method depends on reaching a specific dose, temperature, or time, verify it's actually reaching that number.

Disposal

Sealed bags need to actually go somewhere. In order of preference:

1. **Burial, if you have private property to do it on.** Dig a hole at least 2.5–3 feet deep, at least **200 feet** from any water source (well, canal, creek, pond) or living area. Open the bags and empty the contents into the hole rather than burying the bags themselves, then cover with dirt, followed by a layer of ash or lime if available.
2. **Temporary sealed storage.** If burial isn't possible right away (frozen ground, no private yard, an apartment), store sealed bags in a 30-gallon garbage can with a tight, secured lid, kept outside in a concealed area, away from kids, pets, and wildlife, until real disposal becomes available.
3. **Regular trash collection**, only if local officials have specifically authorized it during a declared emergency. Don't assume this is allowed by default; check with your city or county first.

Northern Utah note: frozen ground

Burial isn't practical once the ground freezes, which along the Wasatch Front is most of the winter. Plan on temporary sealed storage as your primary method for a cold-weather emergency, and treat burial as a warm-season option only.

This covers human waste specifically. Household trash and pet waste are their own two waste streams once collection stops, see Household Trash & Pet Waste Disposal.

When toilet paper runs out

The Tier 1 and Tier 2 supply lists above cover a 14-day stock, but a longer disruption means planning for what happens after that runs out, not just how much to store.

Bidets: which kind, and when they stop working

"Bidet" actually covers two different tools with very different disaster relevance.

A **fixed bidet seat or attachment** installs on your existing toilet. The cheap, non-electric kind (roughly \$30–50) needs no power at all, it runs purely on your home's water line pressure, so a power outage alone doesn't stop it. But it still depends on two things a disaster commonly knocks out together: an actual water supply to the house, and a working drain or sewer line. That's the same pair of failures that triggers this guide's own bucket-toilet setup. In practice, a fixed bidet is a real Tier 1 tool, useful exactly until water or sewer service goes down, and not a Tier 2+ answer.

A **portable, handheld bidet bottle** (the camping or travel kind, a squeeze bottle with a nozzle tip) needs no plumbing at all: fill it from your stored water, roughly **4–16 ounces per use**, about a third to a full cup. That's genuinely usable at any tier, including right alongside the bucket toilet above. Set against the 14 gallons/person Tier 1 figure, or the fuller WHO/Sphere hygiene allowance, a few uses a day at roughly a cup each is a small, absorbable addition, not a real strain on stored water. Pat dry afterward with cloth or minimal paper; hand hygiene below still applies.

Reusable cloth wipes, done safely

Soft cotton or flannel squares (often called "family cloth"), washed and reused, are a real, practiced option, not a fringe idea, but they carry a genuine infection risk if handled carelessly. The safety protocol is the same one cloth diapering already established, since it's the same underlying problem: reusable cloth contaminated with human waste.

1. **Never share cloth between people.** Assign each household member their own marked set, a color or a stitched initial, the same logic as not sharing a toothbrush.
2. Store used cloth in a covered pail until wash day; don't launder after every single use.
3. **Pre-rinse cold**, not hot. Hot water on a fresh stain sets it into the fabric instead of flushing it out.
4. **Wash hot**, ideally 140°F, using the three-basin or bucket-and-plunger method below, since heat is what actually inactivates pathogens. If heating that much wash water isn't practical, add unscented bleach to the wash water instead, the same disinfecting logic this guide already uses for dish sanitizing.
5. **Wash cloth wipes as their own separate load**, never mixed with other laundry; this is the real cross-contamination risk, not a minor suggestion.

6. **Dry thoroughly**, ideally on a line in the sun for the same UV-disinfecting benefit covered in the laundry section below.

Washing a batch this way costs roughly **4–6 gallons per household per wash cycle** (using this guide's own bucket-wash figures), done every day or two rather than per use. That's a genuinely different water tradeoff than the portable bidet bottle above, sometimes more, sometimes less depending on household size and wash frequency, worth weighing against your own stored-water budget rather than assuming one option is automatically cheaper.

If anyone in the household has an active stomach illness, suspend cloth-wipe use for that person specifically and switch to disposable, bagged wipes until they recover, rather than adding their laundry to the batch.

Other short-term substitutes

Newspaper, paper towels, napkins, and coffee filters all work in a pinch, crumpled first to soften them. Soft leaves are a genuine last resort, but only with confident plant identification; poison ivy, oak, and sumac exposure this way is a real, avoidable, and miserable mistake.

WARNING

Never Flush Wipes, Even Ones Labeled Flushable

Baby wipes, cleaning wipes, and products marketed as "flushable" don't break down in water the way toilet paper does. They're a common, real cause of clogged pipes and septic system damage, marketing claims aside. Bag and dispose of them with household trash, or through the human-waste disposal method above if used on the body, never down a toilet or drain, working or not.

Menstrual hygiene without resupply

A reusable menstrual cup or washable cloth pads remove the resupply dependency entirely; wash cloth pads using the same protocol as the reusable wipes above, their own separate hot load, never shared between people.

WARNING

Never Extend a Tampon Past Its Wear Time to Ration a Limited Supply

Toxic shock syndrome is rare but genuinely dangerous, and how long a tampon has been left in is the single most consistent factor across real cases: 8 hours is the real limit, not a conservative suggestion. Early symptoms can look like a mild viral illness, then progress to high fever, low blood pressure, and organ failure within a day or two. If disposable supply is genuinely limited, switch to a

reusable cup or cloth pads, or a lower-absorbency product changed on schedule, rather than stretching wear time on what's left.

Hand hygiene

This is the single cheapest disease-prevention tool available, and it doesn't require running water at all.

1. Wet hands with any available water, even a small poured amount from a jug is enough.
2. Apply soap and lather, covering the backs of hands, between fingers, and under nails.
3. Scrub for at least **20 seconds**.
4. Rinse with a small poured stream of water rather than dipping hands into a shared basin, which recontaminates the water for the next person.
5. Dry with a clean towel or let air-dry.

If no water at all is available, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with **60% or more alcohol** is an acceptable substitute, though it doesn't remove visible dirt or grease the way soap and water does.

Wash hands: before eating or preparing food, after using the toilet, after coughing or sneezing, before and after caring for someone who's sick, and after handling waste of any kind.

Dental hygiene without a full toothpaste supply

Brushing itself is the part that matters most, not the paste. A six-month clinical trial found that mechanical brushing alone, no toothpaste at all, cut plaque buildup by 63% and bleeding by 55%; the paste adds fluoride's extra cavity protection on top of that, a real benefit, but it isn't what's doing most of the work. Brush twice a day for two minutes, and it barely needs running water: wet the brush from a small cup or a poured splash, brush, then rinse the same way.

When the stocked toothpaste supply runs out:

1. **Plain baking soda** is a genuine substitute, not a last-resort compromise. It rates far lower on the abrasiveness scale dentists use to judge toothpaste safety than most people assume, gentle enough for daily use, and it neutralizes acid in the mouth as a real side benefit, reducing enamel erosion rather than just cleaning. A pinch on a wet brush works the same way paste does.
2. If the toothbrush itself is lost or worn past use, a **clean cloth wrapped around a finger**, with a little baking soda or salt, still provides the actual mechanical cleaning that matters most.
3. A **saltwater rinse** (a teaspoon of salt in a cup of warm water) is a genuine antiseptic adjunct worth using alongside brushing, not a substitute for it: real research shows it measurably reduces plaque and

bacterial counts and supports gum health.

WARNING

Untreated Dental Infection Doesn't Stay Contained to the Tooth

Bacteria from an abscess can track into the jaw and neck tissue, and in a rare but real worst case become Ludwig's angina, a rapidly spreading infection that can close off the airway; adult mortality for that specific complication runs 8–10% even with treatment available. Treat a spreading jaw or neck swelling, especially with fever or trouble swallowing or breathing, as a true emergency requiring evacuation to real care, not something to manage with home remedies and wait out. See the Sanitation & Hygiene chapter's Tier 3 guidance for emergency dental care once professional care isn't available at all.

Sponge bathing

1. Warm a basin or bucket of water. It doesn't need to be hot, just comfortable, warm water dissolves oils and dirt far better than cold. If you're bathing someone else, test the temperature on the inside of your own wrist first.
2. Dip a cloth or sponge in the water, wet your body, then apply soap to the cloth.
3. Scrub in order from **cleanest to dirtiest**: face and head first, while the water is freshest, then work down the body, ending with the feet and groin area last.
4. Rinse the cloth and use it to wipe soap off the body in the same order.
5. Change or re-wet the water partway through if it gets visibly dirty.

Unscented baby wipes or body wipes are a reasonable substitute or supplement, especially for a quick clean between full sponge baths, and are worth keeping in a go-bag for exactly this reason.

Laundry without a washer

The three-basin method works with whatever you have on hand, buckets, a bathtub, or a sink.

1. **Presoak**: put clothes in a basin of water with detergent, roughly **1 teaspoon per gallon of water** for standard detergent (less for a concentrated "2X" or "4X" formula, check the label), a real measuring spoon rather than an eyeballed amount, and let them sit for about **15 minutes** to loosen dirt.
2. **Wash**: agitate the clothes by hand, swishing them up and down or side to side, and rub visibly dirty spots against themselves or scrub gently with a brush.
3. **Rinse**: wring out as much soapy water as possible, then move clothes to a second basin of clean water and agitate again to work the soap out.

4. **Wring:** wring out as much water by hand as possible before moving to drying. The less water you're asking the air to evaporate, the faster and easier the next step is.

A clean 5-gallon bucket and a new toilet plunger (used only for this, never after toilet use) makes a serviceable hand-agitator: fill with water, detergent, and clothes, leaving about 1.5 inches of headspace, and plunge vigorously for about 10 minutes in place of hand-agitating.

Drying laundry

A line strung between two fixed points does the job: paracord or any strong cord tied to two trees, posts, or fence points with a **taut-line hitch**, an adjustable loop knot that lets you pull the line drum-tight and re-tighten it later as it stretches or sags. A warm, sunny, breezy day dries clothes fastest and also helps disinfect them via UV exposure, so an outdoor line is worth using whenever weather allows.

Bad weather or no outdoor space: a line strung across a shower or bathtub, an over-the-door or collapsible drying rack, or clothes draped over chair backs near, not touching, a heat source all work. Give it more time and more airflow than an outdoor line would need.

Freezing weather: line-drying outside still works below freezing, ice sublimates directly to vapor, but it's slow. A practical hybrid: hang clothes outside for an hour or two to wring out the bulk of the moisture, then finish drying indoors.

Washing dishes without a sink

Same three-basin logic as laundry, scaled down, plus one step laundry doesn't strictly need: dishes touch food directly, so a sanitizing rinse isn't optional.

1. **Scrape first.** Wipe or scrape food scraps into the trash before any water touches the dish. This is the single biggest water-saver in the process, and it keeps grease out of the wash water and out of whatever you're disposing of it into afterward.
2. **Wash:** hot water with dish soap in the first basin. Wash cleanest items first, glasses and utensils before greasy pans, so the water stays usable longer.
3. **Rinse:** a second basin of clean water to flush off soap residue.
4. **Sanitize:** a third basin mixed at **1 tablespoon of unscented household bleach per gallon of water** (about 100 ppm). Submerge each item for a few seconds, then lift it out and let it air-dry on a rack. Towel-drying can recontaminate what the sanitizing step just cleaned.

Batch dishes once or twice a day instead of washing after every meal. It's the same three basins either way, so running them once for a whole day's dishes instead of three or four times cuts total water use substantially.

Disinfecting after flooding, and preventing mold

Mold can start growing on a wet surface within **24 to 48 hours**, a real deadline, not a rough guideline. Open doors and windows, run fans, and keep indoor humidity under 50% to actually dry a wet space out inside that window. If a space genuinely can't be dried within 24 to 48 hours, treat it as an active mold problem rather than hoping it dried out in time.

WARNING

Floodwater-Contaminated Surfaces Need a Much Stronger Bleach Ratio Than Dishes

The dish-sanitizing dilution above (1 tablespoon bleach per gallon) is nowhere near strong enough for a surface that actually touched floodwater. Use **3/4 cup regular-strength bleach, or 1/2 cup concentrated bleach, per gallon of water**, keep the surface visibly wet for at least 2 minutes, then rinse and dry. Wear gloves, goggles, and an N95 or better respirator, the same PPE this site's re-entry guidance already calls for, and never use bleach in a closed, unventilated space. Anything porous that was actually submerged, carpet included, can't be fully disinfected; discard it rather than trying.

Write your own plan, in one sentence

Disease, not the disaster itself, is what actually kills people in the weeks after. Finish this sentence with your own real plan:

"This week, I will actually build *a real bucket toilet* and keep it
in the garage, ready to go ."

Know someone this guide would actually help? Being the person who's ready includes being the person who says something.

Send them this page ›

Sources

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