

Preparing Your Family for Emergencies

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Floods. Earthquakes. Winter storms. Fire. Hazardous spills. Public safety issues. Disasters can strike quickly and without warning. They can force you to evacuate your neighborhood or confine you to your home. What would you do if basic services—water, gas, electricity, or telephones—were cut off for an indefinite period? Local officials and relief workers will be on the scene after a disaster, but they cannot reach everyone right away.

Families can—and do—cope with disaster by preparing in advance and working together as a team. The American Red Cross recommends everyone be prepared for self-sufficiency for up to 3 days. Knowing your responsibility and what to do is your best protection.

Learn local plans

Check the telephone book for the Emergency Management office or chapter of the American Red Cross. Questions to consider asking are:

- What types of disasters are most likely to happen in this area? Request information on how to prepare for each.
- What are the community's warning signals? Learn what they sound like and what to do when you hear them.
- What are the best ways to help elderly or disabled persons?
- What options are available for animal care?

In most cases, animals are not allowed inside emergency shelters because of health regulations.

- Are there disaster plans for schools and day care centers, shopping areas, and places of work?

Create a disaster plan

Meet with your family to discuss why you need to prepare for disaster. Explain the dangers of fire, severe weather, and earthquakes to children. Share responsibilities.

- Discuss the types of disasters that are most likely to happen. Explain what to do in each case.

- Identify two places to meet. First, for sudden emergencies, such as a fire, meet outside your home. Second, in case you can't return home, meet at a place outside your neighborhood. Be sure everyone knows the address and phone number of that location.

- Ask an out-of-state friend to be your "family contact." After a disaster, it's often easier to call long distance than to call locally. Family members should call this person and tell them where they are. Everyone must know your contact's phone number.

- Discuss what to do in an evacuation.
- Plan how to take care of pets.
- Identify and organize valuables, keepsakes, and important documents.

Put your plan into action

- Post emergency telephone numbers (fire, police, ambulance, etc.) by every phone.
- Teach children how and when to call 9-1-1 or medical service numbers for emergency help.
- Show all responsible family members how and when to turn off the water, gas, and electricity at the main switches. Keep necessary tools near gas and water shut-off valves.
- Evaluate insurance coverage.
- Purchase a basic fire extinguisher. Check with the fire department to see if it provides training on how to use the extinguisher. It's important that each family member knows how to use the extinguisher and where it is stored.
- Install smoke detectors on each level of your home, especially near bedrooms.
- Identify and fix potential hazards (anything that can move, fall, break, or cause a fire—such as a water heater or bookshelf). Annually inspect your home for hazards.
- Stock emergency food and water supplies.
- Assemble a Family Emergency Preparedness Kit; consider developing a smaller kit for each car.
- Take a CPR and first-aid class.

- Determine the best escape routes from your home. Each family member should know two ways out of each room.

- Identify the safe places in your home for each type of disaster.

Maintain your plan

- Quiz everyone in your household every 6 months so they remember what to do.

- Conduct family fire and emergency evacuation drills.

- Replace stored food and water every 6 months.

- Test and recharge your fire extinguisher(s) according to manufacturer's instructions.

- Test your smoke detectors monthly and change the batteries at least once each year. A good time to do this is when changing from daylight savings to standard time (or vice versa).

- Work with neighbors, homeowner associations, or a crime watch group:

- Identify medical or technical experts in your neighborhood.

- Determine how best to help those with special needs, such as the disabled and elderly.

- Make plans for child care in case parents can't get home.

In case of evacuation

- Own a battery-powered radio for emergency instructions.

- Wear protective clothing and sturdy shoes.

- Include your Family Emergency Preparedness Kit.

- Lock your home.

- Use travel routes specified by local authorities—don't use shortcuts because certain areas may be impassable or dangerous.

- If you have time (rely on instructions from local officials):

- Shut off water, gas, and electricity

- Post a note telling others when you left and where you are going

- Make arrangements for your pets

Emergency supplies

Keep enough supplies in your home to meet your needs for at least 3 days. There are six basics you should stock for your home—food, water, first-aid supplies, clothing and bedding, tools and emergency supplies, and special items. Include food and water for pets.

Consider keeping vehicle fuel tanks full so you can evacuate by car if instructed. Also keep a credit card or cash on hand, and have at least one plug-in phone or a cellular phone (cordless phones often don't work without electricity).

Keep the items you need during an evacuation in an easy-to-carry container such as a backpack, duffel bag, or covered trash container:

- A 3-day supply of water (1 gallon per person per day). Store water in plastic containers such as soft drink bottles.

- A 3-day supply of food that won't spoil.

Select foods that require no refrigeration, preparation, or cooking, little or no water and that are compact and lightweight (such as ready-to-eat canned meats, fruits, and vegetables).

- A change of clothing, sturdy footwear, and rain gear for each person.

- One blanket or sleeping bag per person.

- A battery-powered radio, flashlight, and plenty of extra batteries.

- An extra set of car keys and a credit card, cash, or traveler's checks.

- Toilet paper, soap, liquid detergent, and personal hygiene items.

- Special items for infant, elderly, or disabled family members.

- An extra pair of eyeglasses (if appropriate).

- First-aid kit.

Assemble important documents

It's important to have easy access to certain family documents after a disaster. You may want to store important family documents in a portable, waterproof container as part of your Family Emergency Preparedness Kit. Documents to consider include:

- Wills, insurance policies, contracts, deeds, stocks, bonds.

- Passports, Social Security cards, immunization records.

- Bank account numbers.

- Credit card account numbers and company names.

You also may want to include an inventory of valuable household goods, important phone numbers, and family records such as birth, marriage, and death certificates.

When a disaster occurs

1. Remember to remain calm and patient.
2. Put your family's plan into action.
3. Give first aid and get help for seriously injured people.
4. Listen to your battery-powered radio for news and instructions.
5. Evacuate, if advised to do so.

Check for damage in your home:

1. Use flashlights; do not light matches or turn on electrical switches.
2. Sniff for gas leaks, starting at the water heater. If you smell gas or suspect a leak, turn off the main gas valve, open all windows, and quickly get everyone outside.
3. Shut off any damaged utilities (you will need a professional to turn on the gas).
4. Clean up spilled medicines, bleaches, gasoline, and flammable liquids immediately.
5. Confine or secure your pets.

Your last steps:

1. Call your family contact; do not use the telephone again unless it is a life-threatening emergency.
2. Check on your neighbors, especially children, elderly, or disabled persons.
3. Make sure you have an adequate water supply in case service is cut off.
4. Stay away from downed power lines.

Extension resources

The OSU Extension Service has materials on related topics. To locate the local office of the OSU Extension Service, go to "County Government" in your telephone book.

Publications and videos are available for viewing on the OSU Extension website (extension.oregonstate.edu, then "Publications"). You may order copies by fax (541-737-0817), e-mail (puborders@oregonstate.edu), or phone (541-737-2513).

Other resources

American Red Cross. The alphabetical listing in local phone books will point you to a local chapter of the American Red Cross. The agency's website includes information and materials in English and Spanish (www.redcross.org).

Emergency Management. The "County Government" section in local phone books lists each county's emergency management unit. Listings vary by county (look under Sheriff or Health departments, Emergency Management services, Civil Defense, Public Works, or related units).

Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN). This website provides a list of resources developed in other states about floods; drought; snow, ice, and wind damage; animal emergencies; and general disaster (www.agctr.lsu.edu/eden, then "Extension websites" and "Other on-line sources").

Emergency Animal Rescue Service (EARS). This site provides tips for animal owners and links to emergency shopping lists for owners of dogs, cats, birds, horses, reptiles, and amphibians (www.uan.org/ears/index.html).

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The online library offers publications and videos in English and Spanish and includes materials specifically developed for children (www.fema.gov).

Oregon Emergency Management (OEM). Affiliated with the Oregon State Police, the OEM website offers emergency-related information on earthquakes and tsunamis, and provides disaster recovery resources (www.osp.state.or.us/oem).

Social Security Online. The official site of the Social Security Administration, this site links to hundreds of publications in 21 languages and provides information on survivor benefits and programs (www.ssa.gov).