

AAFP Personal and Community Preparedness Guide for Disasters and Emergencies



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Introduction

Disaster preparedness helps individuals, families and communities respond effectively to emergencies, reducing risks and aiding recovery. As a family physician, you can improve safety, resilience and recovery in times of crisis by prioritizing readiness at both the personal and community levels. Once you have planned for the safety of yourself, your family, your pet(s) and your belongings, you will have peace of mind and be able to help others.

Personal preparedness starts with an emergency plan that includes evacuation routes, a reunion location and up-to-date emergency contacts. This guide will help you create your plan; however, the checklists and assessments provided are not exhaustive. Every person and family is different and has their own needs and concerns. As you use this guide, consider your unique needs, including any medical needs and mobility- or disability-related needs.

At the community level, preparedness involves public education, emergency response networks and volunteer efforts. Collaboration between health care professionals and local health departments is key for monitoring public health and helping populations that may have greater needs, including older adults and people who have disabilities or chronic conditions.

Family physicians play a vital role in disaster preparedness. During emergencies, they educate patients, identify people who are at higher risk of poor outcomes and guide chronic illness management. They also volunteer in community response efforts and advocate for improvements in preparedness initiatives.

Personal Preparedness

ASSESSMENT OF RISK AND PREPAREDNESS

The Federal Emergency Management Agency provides contact information for every state’s emergency management agencies at www.fema.gov/emergency-management-agencies. You can contact your local emergency management agency to find out what types of disasters may pose a risk in your area so that you can develop an appropriate personal preparedness plan. Potential disasters could include the following:

- Extreme heat or cold
- Hurricanes or tropical storms
- Ice storms
- Mudslides
- Pandemic flu

- Tornadoes
- Volcanic eruptions
- Wildfires

To prepare for natural and human-caused disasters, it is important to have first-aid and survival supplies, a communication plan, and specific plans for your personal records, each family member and any pets. Be sure to have both cash and credit cards available for emergency use. If there are power outages in your area or the credit card systems at stores, hotels or gas stations are not working, you will likely need cash to make purchases.

Storing your important documents (e.g., birth certificates, marriage license, passports, religious records) in a fireproof and waterproof safe can help protect them in a disaster.

It is also important to review your insurance policy annually to ensure you are adequately covered for potential disasters, including wildfires. Adjust your coverage as needed. Keep in mind that flood insurance typically is sold separately from other homeowners policies and covers damage to a structure but not the contents of the structure.

PREPAREDNESS ASSESSMENT

Do you have plans in place for the following? (Check “Yes” or “No” for each.)		
PREPAREDNESS ACTION	YES (update annually)	NO (to-do list)
Shelter from severe storms that do not require evacuation		
In-home shelter in case of hazards in your area		
Evacuation of your neighborhood or community		
Home evacuation in the event of a house fire		
Shelter during an earthquake		
Care of family during a pandemic		
Place to meet family members if separated in an emergency		
Adequate insurance coverage		

PREPAREDNESS CHECKLISTS

Make a first-aid kit for your home and for each of your vehicles. One basic first-aid kit should be part of a survival kit that includes necessities for at least 72 hours following an emergency (i.e., a three-day survival kit).

FIRST-AID KIT CHECKLIST

Kit last updated: _____

Basic kits should include the following supplies:

- Antacid
- Antibacterial soap
- Anti-diarrhea medication
- Antiseptic
- Aspirin or other pain reliever
- Burn cream
- Hypoallergenic tape
- Latex gloves
- Laxative
- Needles
- Pre-moistened towelettes
- Safety pins
- Scissors
- Sterile adhesive bandages, assorted sizes
- Sterile gauze pads, assorted sizes
- Sterile roll bandages, assorted sizes
- Sunscreen
- Thermometer
- Tube of petroleum jelly
- Tweezers

THREE-DAY SURVIVAL KIT CHECKLIST

Kit last updated: _____

Basic kits should include the following supplies:

Essentials

- Baby supplies (e.g., formula, bottles, pacifiers, diapers, wipes)
- Blankets or sleeping bags
- Can opener (not electric)
- Cash for emergency use
- Chargers/power banks for devices
- Drinking water, one gallon per person per day for at least three to seven days
- Extra keys to house and vehicles
- Fire blanket
- First-aid kit and instructions for use
- Flashlight with extra batteries and/or light sticks
- Hand-crank/solar radio or portable radio/weather radio with extra batteries

- Medications and any medical information for emergency response (e.g., allergies, pacemaker)
- Nonperishable food for at least three days that requires minimal or no heat or water
- Spare eyeglasses/contacts

Sanitation supplies

- Hand sanitizer
- Large plastic trash bags for waste (can also be used as rain ponchos, tarps or window coverings)
- Soap
- Toothbrush and toothpaste

Safety

- Whistle

Dining

- Plastic utensils, plates, bowls and cups

Tools and supplies

- Maps
- Screwdriver, hammer, pliers, etc.

Pet care

- Collar with ID tag
- First-aid kit
- Food for at least three days
- Harness or leash (backup for what pet usually wears)
- Medications and medical record
- Pet carrier
- Pre-moistened towelettes
- Sanitation supplies (e.g., litter)
- Toys/familiar comfort items
- Water for each pet

VEHICLE SURVIVAL KIT

Kit last updated: _____

Basic kits should include the following supplies:

- Blanket
- First-aid kit
- Flashlight with extra batteries
- Nonperishable food and bottled water

Emergency preparedness kits are available for purchase from the American Red Cross at www.redcross.org/store/emergency-preparedness/survival-kits.

COMMUNICATION PLAN

In the event of a disaster or emergency, your local emergency management agency or health department will have specific methods to communicate emergency information to the public. These may include texts, phone calls, digital road signs and social media posts. In addition, communities may use different sirens and signals during a disaster or emergency, so familiarizing yourself with these will help you stay informed. Determine how you will get important information and communicate it to your family and practice team.

If you have a child in school or day care, make a communication plan for them before an emergency occurs. Sit down with your child and talk about the following:

- How to contact you in an emergency
- Who can and cannot pick them up from school or day care
- Where to go if they are released from school early

Practice the plan, especially with young children, and review it during the year to help them remember. If your child is too young to have or use a phone, keep a list of emergency contacts in their bag and attach it to their car seat or infant carrier.

EVACUATION PLAN

Reunion location and out-of-area phone contact:
Primary evacuation destination and planned route:
Alternate route considerations:
Secondary evacuation destination and planned route:
Alternate route considerations:
Special considerations (pets, livestock, neighbors, etc.):

DISASTER PLAN

Your disaster plan should include scenarios for different types of disasters. For some types, you may need to take shelter in your home, while others will require evacuation. The following templates and planning strategies will help you develop a disaster plan.

Evacuation Planning

An evacuation plan lists where you will go when you evacuate and who should be contacted about your evacuation. Consider any mobility- or disability-related needs when creating an evacuation plan for you and your family. If you depend on others for transportation or use public transportation, be sure you have an up-to-date evacuation plan with the people who will transport you. Many emergency shelters will not allow pets, so you should have a backup plan for evacuating your pets. Contact kennels, hotels, friends or family members to secure lodging in advance for each pet.

If you must evacuate your home, be aware of potential dangers, such as wildfires or flooded streets. The primary route you are planning to use may be blocked or closed, so plan primary and secondary evacuation routes. If your evacuation route is flooded and water starts rising around your vehicle, leave the vehicle and move to higher ground if you can do so safely.

Take the following steps when you have been given an evacuation notice or have decided to evacuate:

- Fill your vehicles' fuel tanks and at least one backup fuel container.
- Unplug electronics and move them to an area that is likely to remain dry.
- Fill bathtubs or containers with water. (Note: **Do not** do this in the case of a tornado.)
- Empty all trash and garbage cans in the household.
- Duct-tape all refrigerators and freestanding freezers closed to help contain odors.
- Gather important documents (e.g., birth certificates, marriage license, passports, religious records) in a fireproof and waterproof document bag, lockbox or portable safe to take with you.
- Bring your preassembled survival kit.
- Leave early to avoid traffic.

DISASTER RECOVERY

You can find the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's guidance on recovering from a disaster at www.ready.gov/recovering-disaster. Recovery will be gradual. Ensuring your safety and well-being after a disaster is the first step. Use the following checklists to help you stay safe and begin the recovery process.

Post-disaster safety checklist

1. Address any first-aid needs.
2. Listen for an all-clear message from public safety officials. Monitor the radio and check social media for advisories and instructions in your area.
3. Check for hazards like fires and gas leaks.
 - a. **If you hear a hissing sound or suspect a gas leak, DO NOT TURN LIGHTS ON/OFF OR STRIKE MATCHES.**
 - b. Turn off gas only if you suspect a leak.
 - c. Turn off the main water valve, if necessary.
 - d. If fire is a concern, turn off electricity in the main breaker or fuse box.
4. Watch for fallen power lines and avoid touching objects in standing water.
5. Check on neighbors.
6. Stay off roads.
7. Check for structural damage if it is safe to do so.
8. Clean up potentially harmful materials as soon as it is safe to do so.
 - a. Wear gloves when dealing with anything exposed to floodwater.
 - b. Use extreme caution with debris that may contain sharp objects.
9. Be aware of any wildlife or animals.

10. Record related expenses incurred during your evacuation and keep all receipts.

Post-disaster recovery checklist

1. Take time to rest, eat and hydrate to protect your physical and mental health.
2. Seek medical assistance, as needed.
3. Determine your immediate needs and contact the American Red Cross or other agencies, as needed.
4. When you return home:
 - a. Create an inventory of losses and damage to structures and belongings.
 - b. Check for mold after flooding or extreme humidity.
 - c. Remove wet carpets and standing water as soon as possible.
 - d. Discard any food that may be spoiled or contaminated.
 - e. If refrigerators and freestanding freezers must be discarded, be sure they are duct-taped closed.
 - f. Secure any undamaged property, if possible.
 - g. If the property is not habitable, remove any important documents and belongings, if possible.
5. Check your insurance policies and review your financial stability.
 - a. Ask for an advance on insurance settlements, if needed.
 - b. Check for policies that cover lost income.
6. Ask hard questions.
 - a. Do I need to rebuild?
 - b. Is this the right place to rebuild?
 - c. How can I build to be better prepared for potential disasters?

Water Purification Tips

Safe drinking water is one of the most sought-after commodities in a disaster. Water purification options include the following:

- Bring water to a rolling boil for at least one minute (or three minutes at altitudes above 5,000 feet).
- Add eight drops of regular, unscented 6% bleach suitable for disinfection and sanitization to a gallon of clear water, stir to mix well and let it stand for at least 30 minutes.
- Add five drops of household iodine (2% tincture of iodine) to a quart or liter of clear water, stir to mix well and let it stand for at least 30 minutes.
- Use commercial purification tablets or devices (follow package directions).

Information from Environmental Protection Agency. Emergency disinfection of drinking water. June 24, 2024. Accessed May 5, 2025.

<https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/emergency-disinfection-drinking-water>

EMERGENCY CONTACT LIST

Remember, 911 is for life-threatening circumstances and conditions only.

Emergency Services	Physicians and Other Health Care Professionals
Ambulance	
Fire department	
Police	
Hospital	
Poison control	
Utilities	Personal Contact Numbers
Gas	Local contact
Electric	Out-of-state contact
Water	School
Cable/Satellite	Day care
Phone/Internet	Other
Other	Other
Financial and Insurance	Contractors
Bank	Plumber
Credit card	Electrician
Debit card	Tree service
Mortgage lender	Carpenter/Builder
Auto insurance	Recovery Assistance
Homeowners insurance	American Red Cross: 1-800-RED-CROSS (733-2767)
Other	Federal Emergency Management Agency: 1-800-621-FEMA (621-3362)

TIPS:

- Designate emergency contacts in your phone directory using the following format: Emergency Contact (name of contact). Many smartphones allow you to designate emergency contacts in the settings.
- During and after a disaster, businesses in the affected area may not be available, and cell and landline phone services may be disrupted. List alternate emergency contacts that are outside of the area likely to be affected by a disaster, and include phone numbers and email addresses for each emergency contact.

Community Preparedness

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Many local opportunities for basic and advanced life support training are available. Make sure your Basic Life Support (BLS) certification is current and consider becoming certified or recertified in Advanced Cardiac Life Support (ACLS), Pediatric Advanced Life Support (PALS) and Advanced Trauma Life Support (ATLS).

Other opportunities for physicians to receive training prior to a disaster or emergency include the following:

- The National Incident Management System Training Program offers Incident Command System (ICS) courses that take a comprehensive approach to emergency management.

<https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/icsresource/trainingmaterials/>

- The National Disaster Life Support Foundation offers training programs focused on disaster life support, mass casualty triage and emergency medicine. www.ndlsf.org
- The American Academy of Family Physicians offers the Advanced Life Support in Obstetrics (ALSO®) course in a variety of locations throughout the year. aafp.org/cme/programs/also.html

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

If you are interested in volunteering during a disaster or emergency, many nongovernmental organizations that respond during disasters (e.g., the American Red Cross) need medical volunteers. Be aware that most of these organizations require volunteers to complete registration and training before they can serve.

Another option is joining your local medical response team or a state, regional or national disaster medical assistance team. The following organizations offer medical volunteer opportunities.

Medical Reserve Corps uses a variety of health care professionals to supplement emergency and public health resources during disasters and emergencies. Required qualifications include state licensure and other certifications as specified by the local unit. <https://aspr.hhs.gov/MRC/Pages/index.aspx>

Disaster Medical Assistance Teams are designed for rapid response during the first 72 hours following a disaster. Responsibilities may include triaging patients, providing medical care and preparing patients for evacuation. Team members are required to maintain appropriate certifications and licensure within their discipline.

<https://aspr.hhs.gov/NDMS/Pages/dmat.aspx>

Emergency System for Advance Registration of Volunteer Health Professionals helps states establish standardized registration systems by verifying the identities, licenses, credentials, accreditations and hospital privileges of volunteer health professionals prior to a disaster or public health emergency.

<https://aspr.hhs.gov/ESAR-VHP/Pages/default.aspx>

Community Emergency Response Team programs educate community members about disaster preparedness and provide training in basic disaster response skills, including disaster medical operations.

www.ready.gov/community-emergency-response-team

International Association for Disaster Preparedness and Response is an international nonprofit association that links professionals, volunteers and organizations to prepare for emergencies. www.disasters.org/

PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENTS

Public health departments can provide updates regarding disease activity in your area, ways reporting is handled and changes in community resources. They can also work with you to help develop disaster plans. Consider contacting your local health department to find out how you could provide assistance during a disaster or emergency.

- Search for local health departments by state or ZIP code on the National Association of County & City Health Officials' website at www.naccho.org/membership/lhd-directory.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's directory of health departments that are nationally accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board is available at www.cdc.gov/public-health-gateway/php/communications-resources/accredited-health-departments.html.

ADDITIONAL PREPAREDNESS RESOURCES

General Preparedness	
DHS provides general and emergency-specific information on preparedness for various disasters and emergencies, as well as information on financial preparation, communication and volunteering.	www.ready.gov
Earthquake	
DHS offers the <i>Ready Business QuakeSmart Toolkit</i> as a step-by-step guide to help organizations improve their earthquake readiness.	English: www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/ready-business_quakesmart_toolkit.pdf Spanish: www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/ready-business_quakesmart_toolkit_spanish.pdf
Flood	
FEMA offers resources on flood risks and ways to mitigate the impact of flooding, including flood maps and flood insurance information.	www.fema.gov/flood-maps/know-your-risk
DHS has developed the <i>Ready Business Inland Flooding Toolkit</i> .	English: www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/ready_business_inland-flooding-toolkit.pdf Spanish: www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/ready_business_inland-flooding-toolkit_spanish.pdf
Hurricane	
The National Hurricane Center provides forecasts and analyses related to tropical weather, as well as hurricane preparedness information.	www.weather.gov/safety/hurricane-ww
DHS offers hurricane preparation resources, including information on understanding your hurricane risk, knowing your evacuation zone and preparing important documents prior to a disaster.	www.ready.gov/hurricanes
DHS has developed the <i>Ready Business Hurricane Toolkit</i> .	English: www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/ready_business_hurricane-toolkit.pdf Spanish: www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-11/ready-business_hurricane-toolkit_spanish.pdf
People With Disabilities	
The AAHD provides emergency preparedness resources for people with disabilities and responders.	https://aahd.us/initiatives/emergency-preparedness/
FEMA provides tips and considerations for people who have disabilities related to access or functional needs.	www.fema.gov/press-release/20250121/disaster-preparedness-people-disabilities
Pets	
The CDC provides a checklist of pet supplies needed in case of an emergency.	www.cdc.gov/healthy-pets/media/pdfs/disaster-prep-Pet-Emergency-Checklist-1.pdf
The ASPCA offers disaster preparedness steps for people who have pets.	www.aspc.org/pet-care/general-pet-care/disaster-preparedness
Severe Weather	
DHS offers resources on severe weather, including information on tornadoes, floods, winter weather, and thunder and lightning, as well as recommended action steps to take prior to severe weather events.	www.ready.gov/severe-weather
FEMA highlights current weather disasters occurring in the United States and provides information and resources on accessing disaster assistance.	www.fema.gov/disaster/current
Tornado	
DHS offers resources on tornado risks and provides information on ways to prepare for a tornado and stay safe during and after a tornado.	www.ready.gov/tornadoes
DHS has developed the <i>Ready Business Severe Wind/Tornado Toolkit</i> .	English: www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/ready_business_severe-wind-tornado-toolkit.pdf Spanish: www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/ready_business_severe-wind-tornado-toolkit_spanish.pdf
Wildfire	
DHS offers resources on wildfire risks and preparedness, including emergency plans, supply lists, safety procedures, and ways to recognize warnings and alerts.	www.ready.gov/wildfires