

A disaster can happen anywhere – with little or no warning. If a storm or a wildfire were headed your way, would you know how to secure your property? If you had to evacuate on short notice, could you grab essential items for your family quickly? Although it's impossible to completely disaster-proof your home, there are steps you can take to keep your loved ones and your belongings a bit safer. Every moment matters when a disaster is looming and being prepared can make a huge difference. This guide will help you plan ahead.



Dealing With Disaster

Before



- Know the risks and warning signs, including those specific to your region.
- Purchase insurance, including flood insurance, which is not part of your homeowner's policy.
- Develop an evacuation and communication plan.
- Assemble a disaster supplies kit.

During



- Put your plan into action.
- Take care of your loved ones.
- Volunteer to help others.
- Follow the advice of first responders.

After



- Be careful around debris and safety hazards.
- Repair damaged property.
- Take steps to prevent or reduce future loss.

General Disaster Preparedness

Knowing which threats are most common in your area is important, but some preparedness tips apply to any disaster you might face, whether it's fire, flood, hurricane, earthquake, or something else.

How will you get news and information? When foreseeable disasters like hurricanes are churning off American shores, there's no shortage of news about it. But what about disasters like tornadoes or a terrorist attack, which might only come with a few minutes warning? If you watch network television or listen to live radio, you will probably hear Emergency Alert System (EAS) messages. But if you've "cut the cord" and don't get broadcast signals or don't tune in often, you might want to make a plan.

- Ask how local authorities in your community send urgent warnings. Are there sirens that you will be able to hear?
- Make sure your cell phone is set up for [emergency text alerts](#).
- Consider purchasing a NOAA [National Weather Service radio receiver](#).

Do you know where the nearest hospitals and evacuation routes are? Evacuations are more common than many people realize. Every year, fires, floods, and chemical spills force tens of thousands of Americans to leave their homes. If you've lived in your community for any length of time, chances are you know your way around. But you may not know where your evacuation routes and emergency shelters are.

- Learn the escape routes from your home.
- Make note of the hospitals in your community.
- Familiarize yourself with your [specific evacuation route](#). (Don't try to take shortcuts in an evacuation emergency. They may be blocked.)
- Try to keep your car's gas tank at least half full at all times. You might not be able to fill up if something happens suddenly.

Where would you stay if you had to evacuate your home? Staying in an emergency shelter should be a last resort. They are often strained to capacity and many do not accept pets. If you have other options, it is usually best to use them.


- Identify several places you could go in a crisis, such as a motel or a family member's home in another town. Choose destinations in different directions so you have options during an emergency.
- If needed, identify a place that will accept [pets](#).
- During a disaster, the Red Cross keeps a list of [open emergency shelters](#).
- You can also search for open shelters by texting the word SHELTER and your 5-digit Zip Code to 43362 (4FEMA).


How will you communicate and reunite with family members if you are separated? Emergencies can happen any time, including in the middle of the day when family members are at school and work.

- If you have children, talk to them about who could pick them up in an emergency.
- Designate [safe meeting places](#) where your family should go in an emergency - in your home (ex. basement or interior room), in your neighborhood (ex. by a tree or mailbox), outside of your neighborhood (ex. church or friend's home), and outside of your town.
- Choose someone who lives outside of your area to be your family's designated contact person. This will be the person your family members should contact if they are separated from you. (Make sure all family members know the contact's phone number by memory or have it written on a small [emergency contact card](#) that they carry with them.

Do you know how to shut off your utilities? Natural gas leaks and electrical sparks cause a significant number of fires following disasters. Water leaks can cause flooding and waste clean water when supplies are scarce. Every member of your family should know where the shutoff valves are for your natural gas and water lines, and should know how to flip the switches on your electric circuit box to cut electricity to the whole house.

Do you have a “go bag” or [disaster preparedness kit](#)? This is one of the single most important things you can do to keep your family safe. Sometimes, aid doesn’t arrive until several days after a crisis hits. Whether you’re sheltering in place or evacuating, you should be able to meet your family’s immediate needs for at least three days. If you live in a disaster-prone area, it’s a good idea to keep your emergency items in a few easy-to-carry plastic tubs or duffel bags. These should be kept in a place where you can access them quickly. Here are some of the things your disaster kit should contain.



Emergency Supplies Checklist


Food and Water:

☐ Three-day supply of canned and ready-to-eat foods.
 ☐ Three-day supply of water. (One gallon per person per day – two quarts for drinking, two quarts for food preparation and sanitation.)

☐ Comfort/stress food - candy, instant coffee, tea bags
 ☐ Cooking utensils including a can opener, spoon, and saucepan


☐ Paper plates or “mess kit” dishes


First Aid and Health:

☐ First aid kit with sterile bandages, tape, scissors, tweezers, antiseptic, and thermometer
 ☐ Over-the-counter medicines for fever, pain, and diarrhea


☐ Extra prescription medications for any family members who need them
 ☐ Supplies for contact lenses and eyeglasses

☐ Denture supplies


Documents:

☐ Copies of identification, health, and insurance documents
 ☐ Copies of credit cards and financial account details

☐ Cash or traveler’s checks



Tools:

☐ Flashlight with extra batteries
 ☐ Radio with extra batteries

☐ Candles
 ☐ Matches in a waterproof container

☐ Whistle
 ☐ Sewing kit

☐ Basic hand tools



Sanitation and Hygiene Items:

☐ Toilet paper or hygiene wipes
 ☐ Garbage bags

☐ Soap, liquid detergent
 ☐ Chlorine bleach

☐ Hand sanitizer
 ☐ Toiletry items


☐ Feminine supplies


Clothing and Bedding:

☐ At least one change of clothing and shoes for all individuals in the home
 ☐ Tent

☐ Blankets or sleeping bags
 ☐ Hard hat and gloves

☐ Sunglasses
 ☐ Rain gear


Special Items:

☐ Baby supplies (diapers, formula, bottles, medications)
 ☐ Pet supplies (food, carriers, leashes, ID tags, vaccination records)

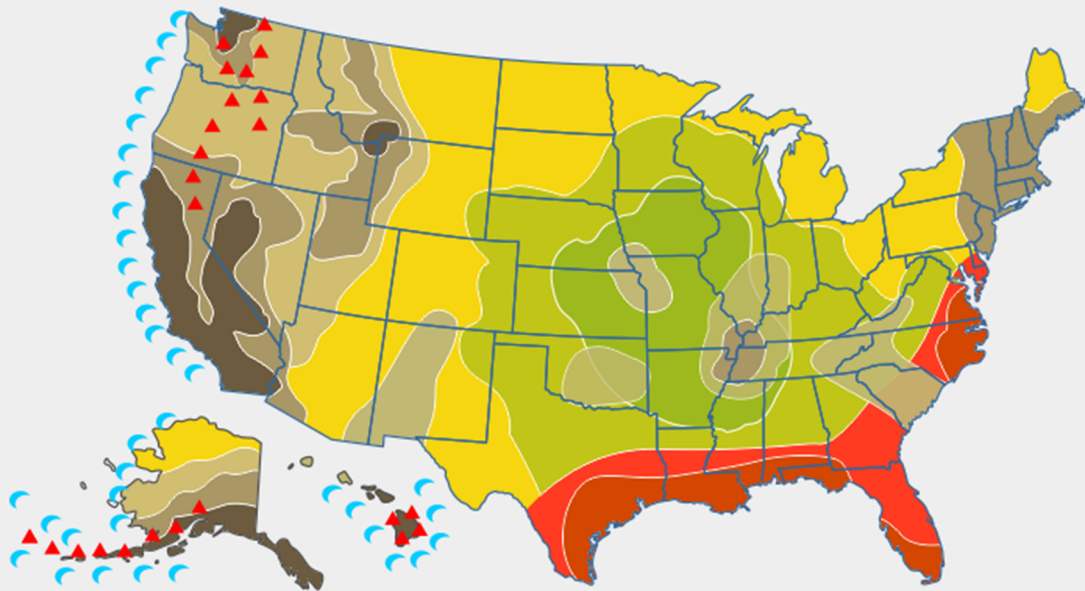
* Put a reminder on your calendar or phone to check the contents of your emergency kit every six months. Swap out any perishable or outgrown items.

Disaster Risks by Region

Regions of the U.S. have different disaster risk factors, but no region is immune to the possibility of a catastrophic event. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 2017 was the costliest year ever recorded for natural disasters, with [16 events whose costs topped \\$1 billion](#). These disasters included hurricanes, wildfires, hail storms, tornadoes, and flooding. These are the most common threats in different parts of the United States.



U.S. Disaster Risk Map



Earthquakes

Low Medium High



Tornadoes

Some Extreme



Hurricanes

Some Extreme



Other

 Volcanoes  Tsunamis

Source: NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information

Hurricane and Flood Preparedness

Hurricanes can be terrifying, deadly, and catastrophically destructive. But compared with other natural disasters, they are probably the easiest to prepare for because typically you have several days of advanced warning before they make landfall. The same is sometimes true for flooding, except in the case of flash flooding.

The biggest danger in a hurricane is [a storm surge](#), which is a rise of water generated by the wind from the storm. Storm tide, a similar problem, occurs when the water level rises during a storm due to the tide and the storm surge. Both can cause tremendous flooding. Wind is another danger, but the water is where the biggest problems lie because it creates catastrophe long after the wind has passed.

Here are some pointers to help protect yourself from disaster [during a hurricane](#):

Remove all items from our yard that could blow around during the storm. Rent a storage unit to keep things like patio furniture and outdoor toys safe.

- Cover windows and doors from the outside using plywood or storm shutters.
- Know how to turn off power, and do so if flooding or downed power lines are a problem. If you have to evacuate, turn off the power to be proactive.
- Fill several containers with clean drinking water. Fill the sink and bathtub with water to be used for washing. This will protect you if the power goes out or you lose water supply during the storm. Plan for at least three days' worth of water.
- Set the freezer and fridge to the lowest possible temperature so your [food will stay protected](#) as long as possible if the power goes out.
- Fill your car's gas tank so you can move out of the storm's path in an [evacuation](#).
- Bring vehicles into the garage or under some cover during the storm.

Flooding is a common problem after a hurricane, but it can happen in other situations as well. Here are some preparedness tips for floods:

- Store items in waterproof containers
- Build a platform to get your stored items off the ground by about six inches.
- Identify an evacuation route that is not near water.
- Practice flood evacuation if you live in a high-risk area.
- Turn off electrical power when a flood is coming.
- Install a sump pump with a backup power source.
- Raise your [electrical sockets and switches](#) a full foot above the projected flood level at your home.

Earthquake Preparedness

Earthquakes typically come without warning. If you live in an area that is at risk for earthquakes, you need to take measures to be prepared. If you don't live in an area prone to earthquakes, you should still consider what you would do, because an earthquake can happen anywhere, at any time and without warning. Here are some preparation tips to ensure that you are ready.

- Practice earthquake drills so all family members know what to do. The safest thing to do in an earthquake is to drop to a hands-and-knees position, cover the head and neck under a table or desk if possible, and hold on to the item you choose for shelter.
- Have an evacuation plan with two ways out. Remember, in an earthquake, it's common for one route out of a space to become blocked.
- Prioritize the items you will take if you must leave your home due to earthquake damage.
- Keep important documents in a fire-proof safe. A fire-proof safe is likely to come out of an earthquake safely, and fires are a high risk after an earthquake due to damaged gas and electric lines. Include a [household inventory](#) in your safe for insurance purposes. Consider stashing this safe somewhere other than your home, like a storage facility, so it is easily retrieved after an earthquake.
- [Move heavy items](#) that could tip or fall off of the wall away from beds.
- Bolt bookcases and other to studs in the wall.

Tornado Preparedness

Tornadoes are devastating because of the sudden nature of these storms. Weather forecasters often have little warning when one pops up and creates devastation, because even when conditions are prime for a tornado, they may not happen. Tornadoes can happen anywhere, but areas with hot, humid weather and frequent thunderstorms are the most likely to suffer from tornadoes. Here are some [tornado preparation tips](#) to keep in mind:

- Know your local warning system, whether it has tornado sirens or a radio-based alert, and tune in to it when conditions are prime for a tornado. Remember that a "tornado watch" means conditions could cause a tornado, whereas a "tornado warning" means one has been seen.
- Know your safest location. For most homes it is a basement or an interior bathroom away from windows. Make sure all family members know where to go.
- Secure the home's structure prior to a tornado to make it stronger in the intense winds that are coming.
- Do not use open flames, including candles, after a tornado until you know there are no gas leaks. Shut off the gas if you smell gas.
- If you have time before you have to go to the basement, move furniture so that it is away from windows, mirrors or picture frames.
- [Anchor top-heavy furniture](#) so that it does not topple in a tornado.

Fire Preparedness

A fire can happen at any time and for any number of reasons. Most of the time you won't have any warning that a fire will occur, so it's important to be prepared. Take a look at this checklist:

- Place copies of financial and personal documents in a fire-proof safe. Consider storing it away from home in a storage facility to ensure it is protected.
- Install [smoke alarms](#) on every floor of the house, choosing interconnected units. Test them monthly and replace the battery once a year.
- Familiarize yourself with exits, and know how to reach two ways out of your home. Make sure children know how to get out of their bedroom safely in a fire.
- Designate an area in your yard to meet, and ensure that all family members know to go there, never back into the building.

How to Use a Storage Unit in a Preparedness Plan

If you have a storage unit, or if you get one, you can work it into your disaster preparedness plan. The most logical way to do so is through storing your belongings in the unit. However, this is just one option. Believe it or not, a [self-storage unit](#) could be a "safe haven" in a serious disaster.

Consider the fact that a storage unit has no windows and only one, secure, door. This means you would be safe from wind and storm damage. In addition, storage facilities tend to be well-built, strong structures, and withstand damage from storms quite well. If you rent a storage unit, you can stash your emergency supply kit in it, and then be prepared when disaster strikes, without taking up all of your storage in your home. If you have nowhere else to go, consider leveraging your storage unit as a "[safe haven](#)" in a disaster.

Of course, most people are not going to have to turn to their storage unit as a place to live in a disaster. Instead, they use it to store the items that they will need in a disaster, like their important documents, in the unit. If you live in an area where a particular type of disaster is at a higher risk, such as a hurricane-prone area or a flood zone, then the way in which you pack your storage unit is important. Here are some tips to make your storage unit "disaster-ready."



Is Your Storage Unit Disaster-Ready?

Choosing a Storage Unit



- Choose a storage unit made out of brick or concrete.
- If you have the option, choose an upper-floor unit.
- Choose a humidity-controlled unit to reduce the risk of moisture damage. Remember, **flood insurance** is not likely to cover moisture damage to belongings in storage.

Packing Your Belongings

- Your items will be safer in water-resistant storage containers, like plastic tubs, than in cardboard boxes.
- Consider protecting papers or fabric items in ziplock bags.
- Set items on a shelf or platform so that they are not on the ground. Pallets are a great choice for furniture that can't go on a shelf. This also allows air to circulate around the item, helping reduce moisture damage if you have a problem.
- Add a bag of charcoal to the unit, and replace every month or two.



What to Do When a Storm Is Looming

If a storm or other disaster is imminent, don't panic. You'll need to be calm and methodical to put your plans into action. Prepare your home by securing items outside, boarding up windows and turning off utilities, if needed. Gather your emergency supplies. Review your communication strategy with family members. Fill your car with gas and tune in to weather radio stations to get updates from local authorities. If you're ordered to evacuate, do so. And above all else, value human life over belongings, because only one can be replaced.

Emergency Preparedness for Seniors

The American Red Cross recommends that senior citizens create a personal support network made up of several individuals who will check in on you in an emergency, to ensure your wellness and to give assistance if needed. This network can consist of friends, roommates, family members, relatives, personal attendants, co-workers and neighbors. Ideally, a minimum of three people can be identified at each location where you regularly spend time, for example at work, home, school or volunteer site.

There are seven important items to discuss and implement with a personal support network:

1. Make arrangements, prior to an emergency, for your support network to immediately check on you after a disaster and, if needed, offer assistance.
2. Exchange important keys.
3. Show them where you keep emergency supplies.
4. Share copies of your relevant emergency documents, evacuation plans and emergency health information card.
5. Agree on and practice methods for contacting each other in an emergency. Do not count on the telephones working.
6. You and your personal support network should always notify each other when you are going out of town and when you will return.
7. The relationship should be mutual. You have a lot to contribute! Learn about each other's needs and how to help each other in an emergency.