

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS GUIDE

For Seniors Caregivers



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Natural disasters are not fun for anyone. Unfortunately, they can be especially traumatizing for seniors. Older people are more frail and less mobile, making it a challenge for them to respond quickly. They may not always have the help they need immediately when they need it to escape a danger zone. The thought is frightening, but the good news is that there are plenty of things you can do to prepare yourself for possible emergencies if you're a senior. If you're a caretaker or a family member of a senior, you can also take measures to help him/her stay safe during dangerous natural disasters. This guide will cover the common types of emergencies that family and caregivers of seniors should be aware of, tips for helping the elderly evacuate when needed, and a handy checklist of items to have and bring with you in the event of an emergency.

View from the Experts: Emergency Preparedness for Older Americans



Michael Martin

EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND PREPAREDNESS SPECIALIST



Power outages are common during storms and can impact the ability to store and prepare food or to have access to potable water. Having an emergency kit which includes food and water supplies for at least three days is important. It is also important to make preparations for taking care of any household pets and making plans for sheltering in case of evacuation.



Scott Sanderson

DIRECTOR OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT



“ By developing an atmosphere of collaboration, you work more efficiently as a team and can quickly react to the uncertainties that each event presents. ”



Sue Robboy

MERCER ISLAND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS VOLUNTEER

“ Make sure you have an emergency plan. Make sure you have adequate food and water for seven to 10 days. Look out for your neighbors, because we are going to be on our own to some extent in our neighborhood when something bad happens. ”

Michael Martin

EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND PREPAREDNESS SPECIALIST



“ Family communication plans are another important part of planning for an emergency. A written plan indicating where to meet and a primary person to contact should be given to each family member. In addition, having an emergency plan for the elderly and those family members with a disability or special medical situation must also be considered. Families should keep cars at least half filled with fuel because, in an emergency, fuel may not be available. ”



Jim Judge

CHAIR OF THE AMERICAN RED CROSS' DISASTER HEALTH SUBCOMMITTEE

“ Seniors are more vulnerable in emergencies because around the world, our population is aging rapidly. Right now, one out of every 10 persons is 60 years or above, and many of our seniors have physical disabilities or conditions that affect their mobility (and) their agility. During an emergency, it may be difficult or even impossible for some seniors to evacuate quickly. Many use wheelchairs. They have walkers. They have trouble seeing, hearing, understanding and they might misunderstand the emergency instructions. That's where special measures need to be taken to ensure that our seniors do evacuate safely or have the proper information for them to be able to weather whatever the storm might be. ”

General Tips for Senior Safety & Emergency Preparedness



Identify Your Risks

The risks you need to be aware of will depend on the area you live in. Some areas are prone to flooding, while others are prone to fires and snow storms, for example. Of course, depending on the risks, you'll want to take appropriate measures to prepare for them. We will go more in depth about each risk later on in this guide and go over some tips for preparing for each.

Familiarize Yourself with Local Resources



What happens when a disaster strikes in your area? Do you know where to go and who to ask for help if needed? Whether you're a senior yourself or family/caregiver of one, it's essential to familiarize yourself with local resources before the emergency takes place. This way, you won't have to fumble around trying to find out what to do next or where to go. Most areas should have emergency shelter locations nearby. Identify those and write out a list of emergency contacts and addresses so that you have it all in one place. Keep this list somewhere safe and readily available to take with you in an emergency. In addition to emergency shelter locations near you, you may want to also consider gathering contact information for your local:



Fire department



Locksmith



Police department



Water supplier



Doctor



Power supplier



Hospitals



Poison control



Animal control



Animal control



Vet



Get a Plan in Place

The most pivotal part to surviving an emergency is having a solid plan. Disasters usually strike unexpectedly, and naturally, it's not easy to think and act logically when this happens. With that said, after evaluating what risks your area may be prone to, it's time to write out an emergency plan that's easy to follow and keep it somewhere accessible. When creating a plan, you may want to consider including information on:



Communication plan with your family and caregivers so that you won't lose touch with the ones you love in any emergency.



Safe and easy escape routes in case of fire or flood. Your plan should detail how to escape from each room in your home so that no matter what room you're in, you have an idea of what to do in case of an emergency. It's best to have more than one route option to be safe.



What to do next after escaping -- where to go and who to call for help if needed.



Emergency contacts, their addresses, and their phone numbers

Make an Emergency Kit: Checklist



What happens when a disaster strikes in your area? Do you know where to go and who to ask for help if needed? Whether you're a senior yourself or family/caregiver of one, it's essential to familiarize yourself with local resources before the emergency takes place. This way, you won't have to fumble around trying to find out what to do next or where to go. Most areas should have emergency shelter locations nearby. Identify those and write out a list of

emergency contacts and addresses so that you have it all in one place. Keep this list somewhere safe and readily available to take with you in an emergency. In addition to emergency shelter locations near you, you may want to also consider gathering contact information for your local:



Non-perishable foods
3 DAYS WORTH



Can opener



Bottled water
(IF YOU HAVE PETS, PACK GENEROUSLY)



First aid kit



Medication
3 DAYS WORTH



Common toiletries



Spare clothing



Blankets



Pet food if you have pets
3 DAYS WORTH



Cell phone charger



Spare keys to your house and car(s)



Cash



Glasses & spare contacts
CONTACT SOLUTION IF NEEDED



Spare hearing aid batteries
IF YOU USE A HEARING AID



Waterproof matches



Flashlight



Swiss army knife



Battery powered radio

Once you've gathered everything, keep your kit somewhere easily accessible so that you know exactly where to grab it in the event of an emergency. If you have any pets, it is smart to keep their pet carriers and leashes easily reached and ready to go in case you need to take them with you quickly.



Get Connected with your Neighbors

It never hurts to become connected with your neighbors, especially if you live alone. Chances are in an emergency, survival depends on teamwork and helping each other out. By building a support network where you live, your neighbors and local friends will know you exist and know to check up on you in the event of a disaster (and vice versa!).

Have your top emergency contacts on hand to provide to your neighbors in case they need to refer to them in any emergency, along with a list of medications, special needs, and allergies you may have.

Staying Safe in Extreme Temperatures

Extreme temperatures are among the worst silent killers, as we often underestimate how dangerous they are. Even in areas that are notorious for extreme temperatures, people will still be unaware of the warning signs from their health that life threatening damage is being done from the extreme heat or cold. Furthermore, many seniors are unaware of the safety precautions to take when in extremely high or low temperatures. We'll go over the precautions to take, so that you can prevent any adverse health conditions when in extreme temperatures.



Extreme Heat

The heat causes fatal health problems for nearly 200 people in the United States every summer. Most of those 200 people are over the age of 50, as the aging body is not able to handle extreme heat as well as younger bodies. First we'll go over how to stay safe in the heat.



Air Conditioning - When a heat wave hits, you'll want to stay inside with air conditioning on. Staying indoors will keep your body from overheating and suffering health ailments like heat stroke and dehydration. If you don't have air conditioning at your home, then try going to the movies, the mall, or the community center.



Avoid the Sun - Direct sunlight during extreme heat, only compounds the effects of the heat. The sun can wear out the body much faster, to a point of losing orientation and fainting. If you must be outside, try to stay in the shade or try to do your chores in the evening or early morning when the sun is not as draining.



Hydration - Your body needs plenty of water to properly function. Once the body is dehydrated for an extended period of time in extreme heat, then organ failure becomes imminent. It is very important to drink fluids to not fall victim to the extreme heat. Do not drink caffeine or alcohol, as they will dry you out faster.



Wear Breathable Clothing - Your clothing can have a huge effect on your internal temperature. Wear clothing that will allow sweat to evaporate, which allows your body to keep cool. Loose, light colored clothing will go a long way in helping your body to withstand the effects of extreme heat. Wear a hat and sunglasses as well, to avoid sunburn and to protect your eyes.



Sunburn - As mentioned above, it can be very easy to get sunburn during extreme heat waves. Sunburn can exasperate skin cancer in the long term, and be very uncomfortable in the short term. Always wear a hat, preferably a wide brimmed hat, when outside. Wear sunglasses to protect your eyes. Always put on sunscreen of at least SPF 30, preferably 70 for good protection against the sun. It is advisable to reapply the sunscreen every hour that you are outside.



How to Cool Down - Take showers or baths that are not heated up, the water will cool down the blood in your veins which will cool down your entire body. Hand towels that are soaked in cold water or wrapped around ice packs and placed on areas where there is a lot of blood flow will also cool down the body rapidly. Areas like the neck, wrists, and armpits are ideal.

Extreme Cold



The cold is just as taxing on the body as the extreme heat is. Seniors are much more susceptible to losing body heat in the cold compared to when they were younger. The aged body is also less aware of when it is getting too cold, meaning an older person may stay out in the cold longer than they're actually safely able to do. Seniors can suffer from hypothermia much more quickly than younger people. Here are a few ways for seniors to stay safe in the extreme cold.



68°F Minimum on Heater - Sometimes it's tempting to turn the heater down to 60-65°F to save on utility costs, but this can be life threatening during extremely cold days. A heater lower than 68° will not properly heat the house, and as mentioned earlier, an older body does not signal the brain when it is too cold. A senior living alone could fall into fatal hypothermia, as they are not keeping their body warm enough to function properly.



Dress Warmly - Again, an older body will not warn you when it is too cold. If you don't feel cold, you'll still want to wear a sweater, long pants, and socks to keep warm. Keeping your body warm is of utmost importance to avoid hypothermia. Even when going to bed, be sure to be fully bundled.



Insulate the House - Make sure your windows are not drafty. Make sure the windows are shut tight and locked, curtains drawn, and install weather



stripping if possible. A drafty house will sap out any heat from the heaters, raising utility bills and making it unsafe for you.



Notify Friends/Family - If you live alone, ask a friend or family member to check on you periodically, to ensure you're not falling into hypothermia and that the conditions of your house are good. You may not be able to diagnose yourself with the signs of hypothermia, but someone else will be able to notice the signs and get you medical help if needed.



Stay Dry - If you go outside and get snow on you, be sure to change clothing as soon as possible as wet clothing saps you of your body heat.

Protecting Your Family & Home from Fires

House fires can happen at any time and spread rapidly, having a plan safety precautions in place will go a long way in keeping everyone safe in the household, as well as preserving irreplaceable belongings. We'll go over preventative measures to take, as well as how to handle house fires should one occur.



How to Protect Your Home From Fires



Keep a smoke alarm on every level of your home, test them monthly, and change the batteries every 6 months



Keep space heaters at least 3ft away from anything that could catch fire easily, and be sure to always turn them off when not in the same room



Chimneys, fireplaces, and wood stoves should be serviced and cleaned each year



Install a fire alarm system that has flashing lights so that seniors in the home with hearing impairments will be alerted



Keep a fire extinguisher on each floor, and in the kitchen



Don't leave cooking unattended in case of an oil fire or dish rag catching fire



Always blow out candles, do not leave them burning in unattended rooms

What to Do in the Event of a Fire



Do the Drill - You should have regular fire drills so everyone in the household knows how to react when a fire occurs. Designate someone in the household to help carry out any seniors that are immobile or unable to move quickly.



Sound the Alarm and Check on Everyone - Most fatal fires occur while



everyone is sleeping. Heavy smoke can put a person into a deeper sleep, with seniors more susceptible to sleeping through the fire. Be ready to check on any seniors in the household to be sure they are awakened by the alarm and on their way out of the home safely.



Stay Low - Seniors should be sleeping on the lowest level of the house/building possible. Stay low to avoid heavy smoke inhalation, and escape quickly.

Preparing for a Hurricane

If you live in an area that is prone to hurricanes, then knowing how to handle one while caring for a senior will make the stressful time easier to get through. Keep in mind seniors are often not able to move quickly, and extreme conditions can complicate their health issues. Here are a few tips to keep in mind in preparation for a coming hurricane.



Be ready to leave instantly. You should have a to-go kit made in advance, to be able to pick up and go immediately. Your to-go kit should have clean clothes, glasses or contacts if needed, personal hygiene products, medications, personal documents, and cash. Water and nutritious snacks should be included as well.



Keep all important documents somewhere secure and easy to grab. Any prescriptions and health records should be kept, in case anyone is having health complications then the doctors will know what they can and

can't do in the emergency room.



Check in regularly. If you are not living with your senior parent, then create a line of communication with their neighbors that can more quickly check in on them while you are on the way over.



Have a medication checklist. You'll want to be sure all the medications are taken when you must evacuate or hunker down somewhere. Nothing is worse than going through a natural disaster and realizing the medications of the senior you're looking after are not present.



Have a list of resources. You'll want to know how to quickly contact relatives, doctors, pharmacists, and local disaster relief specialists.

Are You Tornado Ready?

Tornados can happen much more rapidly than hurricanes, where people often have several days of warning. Tornados, on the other hand, give almost no warning, making preparedness all the more important, to better protect loved ones and the elderly in your care. Nearly [1,200 tornadoes touch down in the U.S. every year](#). When a tornado strikes, you'll want to keep these key things in mind, as with the other disaster scenarios outlined above.



Have an emergency kit with essentials like personal hygiene items, high calorie non-perishable foods, clothing changes, flashlights, and blankets.



You'll also want to be sure you have all the medications that may be needed by an elderly person under your care.



Establish escape routes ahead of time, so everyone knows where to go when disaster suddenly strikes.



Establish who should check on and assist any elderly people under your care.



Establish how everyone will communicate in the event of a tornado. Will everyone use cell phones, walkie talkies, or find each other at a designated meeting spot?



Establish community resources that can be utilized. If you need extra supplies, more water, or emergency help, then knowing ahead of time will make the aftermath of a disaster much easier.



Plan for meeting the needs of any elderly members under your care. You'll want to consider having back up batteries for hearing aids, manual wheelchairs rather than battery powered, and a whistle in case they get separated and unable to move. With a whistle they'll be able to attract attention to themselves to get help.

Knowing Your Flood Insurance Options

For flood prone areas, you've probably already have flood insurance. But do you have the best coverage? There is the federally run National Flood Insurance Program, which is fantastic for covering any structural damage to your home, and some belongings. It does not, however, cover any injuries caused by flooding, or any living expenses like having to stay in a hotel while your home is repaired or until the flood water clears. With elderly people in your home, then not having injuries and additional living expenses covered, will add up very fast.

You can purchase Excess Flood Insurance from the private market that is compatible with the [National Flood Insurance Program](#). You'll get higher coverage limits with private flood insurance - \$500,000 for the home and \$250,000 for belongings. The NFIP is capped at \$250,000 for home and \$100,000 for belongings. Private insurance has options to cover injuries from floods as well as the added living expenses due to displacement from the flood. You'll want to talk to a home insurer to see what is best for your needs, and work out the best rates possible.

Caring for Pets in an Emergency

Pets are family, so they should always be a part of a senior's emergency plan if he or she has one. Below are some tips and things to keep in mind when it comes to [caring for your pets before and during a disaster](#).



Keep Important Documents Updated and Readily Accessible.

Take recent photos of any pets regularly and have them available on file. Make sure that the photos are taken in daylight and is clear. This way, they can be easily identified by others if they get lost. This increases their chances of returning back to you. If you have a dog or cat, it's highly recommended that you get them microchipped and keep a collar on them with a tag including up-to-date contact information in case your pet gets loose during an emergency. Additionally, you will want to keep their vet and adoption papers handy just in case. You never know when you'll need them!



Select Designated Caregiver(s) for your Pet(s)

In any emergency, it can be difficult enough to take care of yourself, not to mention any pets. To ensure that your pets don't experience unnecessary stress in a traumatizing event, having a designated caregiver is really helpful.

Ideally, this person is someone you trust, lives nearby, and is home often to care for them. This way, instead of being in the shelter or another stressful environment, you can be assured that your pets are in a safe place and being taken care of.



Prepare Emergency Kits for Them

In addition to 3 days worth of food and water for your pets as mentioned above, you'll also want to prepare a few more things just for them in the event of an emergency. This will help to cut down evacuation time and stress.



Paper towels



Pet carrier or bag for each pet



Collapsible water dishes and food bowls



Recent photos in case they get lost and you need to use photos for reference



2 week supply of any medications if your pet(s) is on any



Extra leash and harness if you have a dog



Poop bags for easy clean-up



Disposable litter trays if you have a cat



Scoopable litter if you have a cat



Your pet's favorite toys



Liquid dish soap and disinfectant



Wet wipes



Do Not Leave Them Behind!

Remember that pets are family, which means they should not be left behind! Before leaving your residence, you'll want to make sure that you take them with you. If it isn't safe for you to be there, then it certainly isn't safe for them either. After you and your pets have evacuated safely, you may need to have a caregiver watch over them temporarily depending on your circumstances.

If you don't have a caregiver available, then it's time to look into boarding facilities or vets that offer boarding services. Some animal shelters will gladly take in your pets during a disaster for the time being too. You'll want to check around your area and inquire so that you know exactly where to go if you need to find your four legged friends a temporary home.

Conclusion

Everyone knows it's always stressful to deal with natural disasters. The worst part is, they are not always avoidable or predictable. With that said, it's important to be fully prepared in order to survive in any that may strike at any time. This is true for all of us, but the elderly will especially benefit greatly from taking matters into their own hands earlier on as they may not have the ability to escape an emergency as quickly.

Having everything planned and organized ahead of time will reduce the amount of time needed to get out. Remember that when an emergency strikes, time is of essence! Even having that emergency kit prepared and ready to take with you is one step closer to surviving a disaster. Instead of spending your valuable time fumbling through your home at the last minute trying to decide what important belongings and must-haves to bring with you, you could use that time to help get your pets out safely or quickly grab any other special belongings you may want to take with you, for example.

Again, nobody can tell you when a disaster or emergency will hit. So, give yourself and your seniors a peace of mind and make a plan now -- it's better to be safe than sorry!

Additional Resources



[AAHA](#) - This website provides additional information on caring for your pets during emergencies.



[Red Cross](#) - Find out more on why it's so important to have a personal support network when you're a senior preparing for any emergency.



[SCC Gov](#) - Review additional tips for emergency preparedness. These pointers are great for both family and caregivers of seniors to keep in mind too.



[The Zebra](#) - This page is super handy for family and caregivers of seniors as it goes over different measures to take to protect the important older people in our families.



[Insurance Information Institute](#) - Learn more about the importance of home insurance and the different options available to seniors.