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Preparing for Disaster P.1

## PREPARING FOR DISASTER

Natural disasters include tornadoes, floods, wildfires, earthquakes, and hurricanes. Man-made disasters include events such as power outages, arson, terrorist attacks, and radiation threats. Some of the steps a family can take to prepare for an emergency are the same for either a natural or a man-made disaster. For example, a well-stocked medical supply kit is valuable regardless of the type of disaster.

A disaster can strike a family with little or no notice. It can cause people to evacuate a home immediately, or it may confine people to their home. Basic services—such as electricity, gas, water, and telephone services—may be cut off for extended periods of time. A family disaster plan helps families prepare for these types of adverse situations and mitigate the devastating effects of a disaster.

### COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Communicating the need for a family disaster plan is a critical first step in the process. In particular, the dangers of fire, weather catastrophes, and earthquakes should be explained to children. The whole family should plan to share responsibilities.

To be effective, the plan should be fairly simple. Extremely complicated disaster plans are less effective and can cause confusion. One preliminary step in this process is to discuss the types of events that can happen in a community. For example, a home on the Florida coast is certainly exposed to hurricanes, whereas one in central Oklahoma is more likely to suffer from tornadoes.

### DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE DISASTER PLAN

A comprehensive family disaster plan should, at the bare minimum, address the following 10 items.

- 1. Identify Hazards in the Home.** To lessen the impact of a disaster, hazardous objects or conditions around the home should be remedied. For example, any frayed electrical wiring or leaky gas connections should be fixed. Shelves should be carefully fastened, and oily rags or solvents need to be securely stored in metal containers.
- 2. Obtain First Aid Supplies and CPR Skills.** All family members, including older children, should learn basic first aid skills. Effective and prompt first aid attention to medical emergencies, such as choking, spinal injury, bleeding, electrocution, heart attack, and burns, can reduce injury and save lives.
- 3. Establish a Disaster Meeting Place and Family Contact.** Due to the wide variety of possible disasters, two meeting places should be established. In the event of a sudden emergency, such as a fire or explosion, a location right outside the home might be arranged. If a disaster occurs while one or more family members are outside the home, a location outside the neighborhood should be determined, such as at a restaurant or mall. All family members should know the phone number and address of this location. In addition, identify an out-of-state friend to be the “family contact” if a major disaster were to strike. After a disaster, it is often easier to call long distance. All family members should commit this phone number to heart.
- 4. Develop Adequate Water Storage.** If a flood, earthquake,

hurricane, or power outage strikes a community, access to water may be restricted. Most people drink at least two quarts of water per day, according to the American Red Cross. Hot weather can dramatically increase this amount. Water is also necessary for food preparation and hygiene. Thus, at least one gallon of water per day per person is necessary. Most experts say at least several days worth of water per person should be stored. You should store water in thoroughly washed glass, plastic, fiberglass, or enamel-lined metal containers. Plastic containers, such as cola bottles are excellent choices. Water should be stored in a cool, dark location, such as a basement, and should be rotated twice a year. If an emergency finds you without stored fresh water, the water in your hot water heater can be used.

**5. Prepare a Food Supply.** Although people can survive with little or no food for days or weeks, it is wise to stock some food in the event of a major catastrophe. Foods that require no refrigeration, such as canned meats, fruits, and vegetables, work best. Powdered milk is another good selection. You should store a manually operated can opener and disposable utensils along with the food. The American Red Cross recommends that a 2-week supply of food per person be stored in a cool location. If the electricity is lost, people should first eat perishable food from the refrigerator and then the food from the freezer. To limit the number of times per day the refrigerator or freezer is opened, a list of items included in each of these appliances is necessary. Food in freezers can often last up to 3 days, if the door is infrequently opened.

Note that dry ice may be used in certain emergencies to keep food cold. Dry ice provides more than twice the cooling energy per volume than regular water ice. Thus, if the power in your neighborhood goes out and you decide to stay in your home, a dry ice distributor can be contacted. It is not, however, a product you can store on a long-term basis.

**6. Store Emergency Supplies.** In addition to food and water, a kit of emergency supplies is vital. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security recommends that families should put together two kits. One should be used for emergencies in which people normally need to stay where they are, such as a major power outage affecting the entire community. The other kit should be a lighter, smaller, and easily transportable version of the stay-at-home kit, for evacuation situations, such as hurricanes.

**Basic emergency supplies should include the following.**

- a. Power flashlight and extra batteries
- b. Battery-powered radio
- c. Prescription medicines and vital over-the-counter medicines
- d. First aid kit



- e. Toiletry articles
- f. Filtered masks for nose and mouth
- g. Infant and small children's needs (if appropriate)
- h. Fire extinguisher

For those in hurricane-prone areas, plywood and nails are also essential storage items.

**Develop an Emergency Evacuation Plan.** If an imminent flood or hurricane is threatening your community, you need to take necessary steps to protect your home and personal property. These should be performed only if local officials have not yet asked persons in the threatened area to leave. First, outdoor property such as trash cans, garden equipment, and lawn chairs should be brought inside the garage. This will keep them from flying or floating around and damaging the home or neighbor's homes. Second, important items such as family photos, tax records, personal property inventory, and insurance policies should be moved to higher locations or out of the home. Also, hazardous materials such as paint and oil should be moved to a higher location if possible. Third, electricity at the main fuse box should be turned off. Fourth, water should be turned off at the main valve.

**Prepare for Disaster in a Vehicle.** If a disaster strikes while you are in your car, certain steps should be taken. If an explosion destabilizes your vehicle, you should safely pull over, set the emergency brake, and if possible, call for help. If a disaster, such as an earthquake or a flood, affects the stability of the road you are on, you should avoid bridges, overpasses, electrical lines, signs, and related objects. If you see a nearby tornado approaching, you should get out of your car and seek shelter because a car cannot outrun a tornado. If no shelter is available, lie down in a low area and use your arms to cover the back of your head. During winter months in cold climates, it is advisable to store extra warm clothes, a small shovel, a blanket, and some sand or ice in your car's trunk in case you are stuck in snow or stranded on the road.

**Prepare for Disaster at Work or School.** You should ask about the disaster plan at work or at your children's school. If none is available, request that one be developed or volunteer to help develop one. If you work in a high-rise building, make sure you thoroughly understand the emergency plans, including exit locations. It is also advisable to keep a working flashlight if you are in a high-rise office building.

**Practice, Modify, and Maintain the Plan.** The whole family should practice the plan every 6 months, including evacuation drills. You should use a checklist to facilitate this process. The checklist can also be tailored to address perils common to a particular community, such as earthquakes for people near the San Andreas Fault in California. Modifications and improvements in the plan should be noted and practiced. Stored water and food should also be rotated every 6 months. In addition, fire extinguishers and smoke alarms should be properly maintained.

## **OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

Here are some key websites with additional information on this topic:

### **Family Disaster Planning**

American Red Cross: <http://www.redcross.org/>

Federal Emergency Management Agency: [www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=3692](http://www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=3692)

United States Search and Rescue Task Force: [www.ussartf.org/family\\_disaster\\_planning.htm](http://www.ussartf.org/family_disaster_planning.htm)

United States Department of Homeland Security: <http://www.ready.gov>

### **First Aid Training**

American Red Cross: <http://www.redcross.org/>

### **Natural Disasters**

National Weather Service: [www.nws.noaa.gov](http://www.nws.noaa.gov)

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5700 Canoga Avenue,  
Suite 400  
Woodland Hills, CA 91367  
[800] 578.8802  
[www.pomsassoc.com](http://www.pomsassoc.com)  
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