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Disaster Preparedness and Recovery for Older Adults

While everyone is at risk during a natural weather-related disaster or similar emergency, older adults can be especially vulnerable during these challenging times. Being prepared in advance can literally mean the difference between survival and death, particularly for those who may have special medical or mobility needs. Read on to learn more about safety planning steps to consider now, whether you plan to remain at home or be evacuated in the event of an emergency.

NIA-funded research on older adults and disasters

Weather and climate disasters are on the rise. In 2021, there were 20 extreme weather and climate events in the United States, triple the average number of events 15 years earlier. These extreme events include droughts, heat waves, wildfires, floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Research suggests that older adults are particularly vulnerable to the health effects of these disasters. As a part of a [broader NIH-wide initiative](#), NIA supports research that explores the effects of extreme weather and natural disasters on older adults, with the ultimate aim of improving the well-being of people who experience these events.

► Learn more in [Protecting older adults from the effects of natural disasters and extreme weather](#).

Evaluate and plan

The first step is to learn about what kinds of disasters are most likely to affect you and your family based on where you live. For example, while flooding can happen anywhere, communities near water may be more likely to experience floods. And people who live close to a forest may be more likely to experience wildfires. Thinking about what your community is most likely to encounter will help you understand what you might need to include in your plan. For more information on preparing for various disasters and emergency situations, visit www.ready.gov/be-informed.

Next, develop a plan that includes possible evacuation routes and locations of shelters. State, county, and local governments will often set up emergency shelters or evacuation centers for people affected by disasters. These may include air-conditioned facilities for extreme heat waves or shelters at higher ground in the event of flooding. Search for open shelters in your area by texting SHELTER and your ZIP code to 43362 or by visiting www.ready.gov/shelter or www.disasterassistance.gov.

Discuss your plan and needs with friends, family, caregivers, and neighbors. Identify specific people you trust and who would be willing to help in a crisis. Fill out an [emergency communications plan](#). Include backup communication measures for how to keep in touch, and have a fallback plan in the likely event of power and internet outages. Be sure to keep cell phones and similar electronics charged regularly.

Another part of planning is protecting important documents and records. These include:

- Identification, Social Security cards, passports, birth certificates
- Health and dental insurance
- Medical records
- Property insurance policies
- Family or other emergency contact information

For a full list of documents to consider, visit [Safeguard Critical Documents and Valuables](#) from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Store important documents in a fireproof and waterproof container and save a digital copy. Also consider reviewing and updating your home insurance policy, if needed. For example, many insurance policies do not include flood coverage.

Know the weather, stay informed

To stay updated on the latest weather information and forecasts, download the [FEMA app](#), which includes real-time weather alerts as well as information for use before, during, and after a disaster. Alternatively, consider purchasing a [NOAA weather radio](#) or downloading the [NOAA weather app](#). The [USGS Earthquake Notification Service](#) is a free service that can send earthquake alerts by email or text. These sources can provide weather emergency information even in the event

of outages that can affect television stations, power grids, and cellular phone networks.

Stock an emergency kit

► [Read and share this infographic](#) about the 10 emergency kit essentials.

A good emergency kit should contain the essentials you need for three to seven days, including supplies and backup options if you lose basic services, such as water and electricity. You will need an emergency kit whether you stay home during a disaster, also known as “sheltering in place,” or evacuate. Some people also opt to keep a smaller portable emergency kit, such as a packed duffel bag or backpack, in their car or at their workplace in case they encounter an emergency while away from home.

[Emergency kits](#) should contain:

- Water (one gallon per person per day for several days, for both drinking and sanitation)
- Food (at least a several-day supply of nonperishable food) and a manual can opener
- Battery-powered or hand-cranked radio for weather and evacuation information
- Flashlight or headlamp with extra batteries
- First-aid kit
- Dust masks, plastic sheeting, and duct tape to help filter contaminated air
- Soap, hand sanitizer, personal hygiene, and sanitation supplies
- Wrench or pliers (to turn off utilities) and multitool for general use
- Sleeping bags or warm blankets
- Whistle (to signal for help)
- Cell phone with chargers and a backup battery
- Local maps
- Change of clothing and sturdy shoes
- Eyeglasses, hearing aids, and backup hearing aid batteries
- Over-the-counter and prescription medications
- Essential health information/important family documents

Planning for pets and service or support animals

Have a plan and supplies for your furry friends, too. Many emergency shelters will only accept service animals, so consider your pets' needs and backup options with friends, family, and neighbors. Check out guidance on how to prepare your pets for disasters from [Ready.gov](https://www.ready.gov) and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov).

Consider your medical needs

As you make a plan and assemble supplies, consider special needs related to medical conditions or disabilities. For example, those with Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia may require extra assistance during disasters and additional help to lessen agitation during a stressful event. Include comfort items like a favorite pillow or blanket in your emergency kit, as well as favorite snacks and high-nutrient drinks. Additional tips for individuals with medical conditions or disabilities are available at [Ready.gov](https://www.ready.gov).

If you or a loved one require [durable medical equipment](#) — which can include low-tech devices such as canes and walkers, or more complex ones that require electricity, such as a hospital beds, oxygen machines, or electric wheelchairs — take those into consideration in your plan. Many types of durable medical equipment can be challenging to replace during disruptions to the health care system and supply chain during a disaster.

[Research has shown](#) that just 25% of older adults who use essential medical equipment requiring electricity have a backup power source for it. Talk to your doctor or medical supply provider about alternate or backup equipment options, such as a manual wheelchair or an oxygen tank that does not require electricity. Many communities have set up programs for "Citizens at Risk," and older adults and others with medical conditions should check with their local governments about available resources.

For medical treatments such as dialysis, discuss alternate plans and backup treatment options with your doctors in case your regular facility is affected by a disaster. If you take a medication that requires refrigeration, consider alternative power sources and storage options in case of a [power outage](#), and perhaps even a substitute drug. Discuss options with your doctor as part of your overall emergency plan.

Plan for an efficient evacuation

In some weather disasters or similar emergency situations, local officials will advise people to leave the area. Evacuation alerts may be issued through TV and radio stations, social media and cell phone alerts, and sometimes even in person door-to-door.

If evacuation isn't mandatory, you should be realistic about your desired comfort and safety level, personal mobility, and how much help you may need, and then factor all of those considerations into a decision whether to shelter in place or leave. Above all, it's important to prepare and communicate so you are ready to evacuate, if and when the time comes.

Tips for efficient evacuations include:

- Keep your emergency kit updated, stocked, and easily accessible.
- Take time to practice your evacuation plan with family and neighbors so you are prepared for different scenarios.
- Learn and practice how to safely leave your home, including knowing how to turn off the water and natural gas.
- Anticipate road closures, traffic jams, and public transportation delays.
- Know how to access local emergency shelters.
- If you no longer drive, arrange in advance for a friend, neighbor, or family member to pick you up.
- In addition to paper copies, learn how to store emergency contact information in your cell phone and keep your phone charged.
- Be sure to communicate with neighbors, friends, and family on your plans and check in once you are safe.
- If you know you are physically unable to evacuate in certain situations, notify your local government, which may have a system in place for tracking those who may need rescuing after disaster strikes.

Learn about recovery assistance

After the storm comes the challenge of recovery. Serious disasters can have traumatic consequences, including damage to your home and belongings and even death of loved ones. You may need to leave your home for a time or find a new home entirely. Older adults who are displaced by a disaster are especially at risk of [social isolation and loneliness](#). Many local, state, and federal agencies, along with

nonprofit organizations, can assist with post-disaster needs. Explore these resources to learn more:

- [Recovering from Disaster \(Ready.gov\)](#)
- [Get Assistance After a Disaster \(FEMA\)](#) or call 800-621-3362
- [Disaster Distress Helpline \(Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration\)](#) or call 800-985-5990
- [Disaster Assistance for Older Adults \(National Council on Aging\)](#)

Staying safe during a disaster starts with preparation. Making a good plan and discussing it in advance with your family, community, and other support networks can go a long way in helping to protect your health, safety, and property during an emergency.

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