

Family Disaster Planning

Disaster Preparedness: Get Ready

Emergencies and disasters can strike anyone, anytime and anywhere. They can happen quickly and without warning and can force you to evacuate your neighborhood or confine you to your home.

It is vital that you understand what a disaster could mean for you and your family. This booklet will help you prepare your family and property for unexpected emergencies and forecasted disasters.

- [1. Understand What Could Happen](#)
- [2. Create a Disaster Plan](#)
- [3. Make an Emergency Supplies Kit](#)
- [4. Listen for Local Instructions](#)
- [5. When the Disaster is Over](#)
- [6. Important Preparedness Tips](#)

1. Understand What Could Happen

Look Around Where You Live

Virginians experience hurricanes, winter storms, thunderstorms, toxic spills, earthquakes, tornadoes, terrorism, flooding and fires. Look around where you live. Do you live near a highway where a hazardous material spill could occur? Are you in a flood-prone area? Ask yourself what emergencies or disasters could occur in your area.

Learn About Community Disaster Plans

Learn how facilities will handle an emergency where you or your family spend time, such as your workplace, your children's school or daycare center and your community.

Know Your Community Warning Sirens

Know what they sound like and what to do when you hear them. Keep a battery-powered radio and extra batteries handy so you can get important information in an emergency, even if the power is out. A NOAA Weather Radio is a valuable source of information. Most models have an automatic alert feature that can be programmed for your specific area.

The hearing-impaired might have difficulty hearing sirens or other types of alerts. Consider purchasing an alert system with a visual signal and make special arrangements ahead of time through local emergency management officials.

When Disaster Strikes

- There can be significant damage and loss of life.
- Health and mental health resources can be overwhelmed.

- Media coverage and public fear can continue for a prolonged period.
- Public facilities, workplaces and schools might close. Officials might restrict travel.
- You might have to evacuate to a designated location or remain where you are for an extended period of time.
- Cleanup might take months.
- Water, food or medicine might be contaminated.

2. Create a Disaster Plan

Prepare for What Might Happen

Discuss with your family, friends and neighbors the types of disasters and emergencies that are most likely to happen and what to do in each case. Take a first aid, CPR or other class so that you have the knowledge to help yourself and others if needed. If you do not own a vehicle or drive, learn in advance what your community's arrangements are for those without private transportation.

Contact school officials to learn how they will notify you of your child's status if an emergency occurs. For older children who self-transport, ask them to follow the instructions of authorities.

Have an Out-Of-Town Contact

After a disaster, it's often easier to call long distance than to get a local call to connect. Ask an out-of-town friend or relative to be your family emergency contact. All family members should call this person in an emergency to check in.

Plan for Your Pets

Many emergency shelters will not accept pets other than service animals. Talk to your veterinarian or local humane society in advance about an emergency plan for your pets. Or, plan to shelter your pet with family, friends or in a pet-friendly motel.

If you do have to leave your pet at home, post stickers or signs on doors that are clearly visible from the outside. Specify what types and the number of animals.

Plan for the Mobility-Impaired

Keep support items in the same place, so they can always be found quickly. For those who have home-health caregivers, particularly for those who are bed-bound, it is essential to discuss emergency procedures with your service representative. Have an alternate plan. Know your neighbors and consider how they can assist you if the home-health caregiver cannot come to you. Contact your local emergency manager to learn what plans are in place to assist you in case of evacuation.

Determine Where to Meet

Decide now where you and your family will meet in case you can't return home because of an emergency. Keep a record of the location's address and phone number, as well as the phone numbers of your family, with you at all times.

Insurance Coverage

Homeowners' insurance typically does not cover flood damage. If you live in an area that's prone to flooding, talk to your insurance agent about purchasing flood insurance.

Inventory Home Possessions

Make a visual or written record of your possessions to help you claim losses in the event of damage. Include photographs of cars, boats and recreational vehicles. Get professional appraisals of jewelry, collectibles, artwork or other items that might be difficult to evaluate. Also, photograph the exterior of your home. Include the landscaping that might not be insurable but does increase the value of your property for tax purposes. Make copies of receipts and canceled checks for valuable items.

Keep these and other vital records, such as your insurance policies and birth certificates, in one location in a waterproof container or in a safety deposit box. They will help you claim assistance.

3. Make an Emergency Supplies Kit

When a disaster strikes, you might not be able to buy essential items. If businesses close, fallen trees block roads and power goes out in your area, you will need an emergency supplies kit.

Have enough supplies on hand to last at least three days for each member of your household:

- Three gallons of water per person
- Foods that require no refrigeration, preparation or cooking, such as canned goods. Include a manual can opener.
- Emergency tools such as a battery-powered radio, flashlight and extra batteries
- First aid kit that includes a list of any family members' allergies and contact lenses or an extra pair of glasses
- A week's supply of prescription medications
- Sanitation supplies, including toilet paper, soap, plastic garbage bags and personal hygiene supplies
- A change of clothing, footwear and blanket or sleeping bag
- Extra set of car keys; cash in small denominations or traveler's checks
- Special items for infant, elderly or disabled members of the household

Pets should also have emergency supplies, including a carrier or leash, food and bowls, cat litter and litter box, medications and schedules, identification, contact information, veterinary shot records, beds and toys.

Remember that evacuation shelters often do not provide blankets, sheets or pillows. If ordered to evacuate, bring these items with you.

Make sure you store your kit where you can get to it easily and quickly – in an emergency, you might have only minutes to act.

When assembling your emergency kit, be sure it's not too heavy or bulky for you to carry. You might need to store items in more than one container or a suitcase with wheels. Label your kit with your name and contact information. For those with budgetary concerns, collect these supplies over time.

Specific Needs

Keep in mind the specific needs of your household. Your emergency supplies kit should contain the essential items to keep each member of your household safe for at least three days.

Make sure you have contact numbers for your pharmacy and medical supply providers if a household member requires oxygen, dialysis supplies, diabetes supplies, etc.

4. Listen for Local Instructions

Before, during and after a disaster, it is critical that you listen for the most local, up-to-date information from emergency officials. Local media will convey instructions from local, state and federal government partners, such as:

- Orders to evacuate
- Details about evacuation routes
- Locations of evacuation shelters
- How to safely stay where you are
- Where to find assistance
- Weather warnings and watches

Make sure your battery-powered radio is working in case the electricity goes out.

If children are in school during a disaster or emergency, check the local media for announcements about changes in school openings and closings. Parents can pick up their children during the school day, but sometimes the safest place might be the school itself.

If Ordered to Evacuate

- Take your emergency supplies kit.
- Listen to your battery-powered radio or car radio, and use travel routes specified by local authorities. Don't use shortcuts – certain areas might be impassable or dangerous.
- Implement your pet's evacuation plan. People who need special help or transportation during an evacuation should listen to local media for instructions about what to do during an evacuation.

If Instructed to Stay Where You Are

- If local emergency officials tell you to “shelter-in-place” or stay where you are, you must remain in your home or office and protect yourself there.

- Lock all windows and exterior doors, and close vents and fireplace dampers. Turn off all fans and heating and air-conditioning systems.
- Get your emergency supplies kit, and make sure the battery-powered radio is working.
- Go to an interior room without windows that is above ground level. Some chemicals are heavier than air and might seep into basements.
- In case of contaminated air, use duct tape and plastic sheeting to seal all cracks around the door and any vents into the room. Include spaces around pipes.
- Listen to the radio or television until you are told all is safe or you are told to evacuate.

5. When the Disaster is Over

Once the immediate danger has passed, it might take weeks or even months for you and your community to recover.

If you evacuated, be careful when you return home. Structural damage and mold from flooding can cause health risks. Be alert for snakes and other wild animals that could have taken refuge in your home during the disaster.

Contact your insurance company if your home is damaged.

If your area is declared a federal disaster area, you might be eligible for assistance such as temporary housing, help with uninsured home repairs, etc. Listen to local news for instructions about how to apply for assistance.

Following an emergency, some people try to take advantage of those affected by disaster through price gouging and other scams. Be alert for such illegal activity. If you suspect someone is trying to take advantage of you, report it to the Federal Trade Commission at (877) 382-4357 or to the Better Business Bureau on their Web site, www.bbb.org. [external link -- will open in a new browser window]

When an Emergency Occurs:

1. Follow your plan.
2. Listen to local radio or television for information about what you should do.
3. Be prepared to evacuate your home if authorities order you to do so.
4. Check for fires, electrical or other household hazards.
5. Check on your neighbors.
6. Call your family contact to check in.
7. Avoid driving except to evacuate. Be alert for road hazards, such as flooding. Never drive through floodwaters; they might be deep enough to carry your vehicle away.
8. If the disaster occurs near you, be prepared to give first aid and get help for seriously injured people.
9. Check for damage using a flashlight. Do not light matches or candles or turn on electrical switches.
10. If you smell gas or suspect a leak, turn off the main gas valve, open windows and get everyone outside quickly. If you shut off the gas valve, you will need a professional to turn it back on.

6. Important Preparedness Tips

If You Lose Electricity

- Notify the power company immediately if you and your neighbors have lost power.
- Keep a traditional, non-cordless telephone available — it doesn't require household electricity to operate. However, if you have fiber-optic telephone service, you might lose the ability to use the telephone when your home loses power, whether you use a non-cordless telephone or not. Check with your telephone service provider to see if they provide battery backup and consider purchasing an uninterruptible power source for your telephone. Be sure to keep your cell phone charged in case you need to make an emergency phone call.
- Turn off all major appliances. Keep refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible.
- If you have a portable generator, only use it outside in a well-ventilated area, away from doors and windows.
- In cold weather, be prepared to drain water lines, pumps, supply lines and boilers because they can freeze and burst when power is lost.
- Traditional analog telephone service carries voice information along a copper line, which also provides power to a non-cordless phone. When you switch to a digital telephone service, one that travels over fiber-optic lines, you lose power. Currently, Verizon is the only digital service provider that has a four-hour battery backup during an electrical outage. However, after four hours, you will have no telephone service, this applies to you.

Emergency Numbers

Post emergency numbers near or program them into all your phones (fire, police, ambulance, utilities, your physician, etc.). Teach your children how to call these numbers and when it is appropriate to do so. Include emergency numbers for water/sewer, electricity and the National Poison Control Center, (800) 222-1222.

Utilities

Know how, where and when to turn off water, gas and electricity in your home. Only turn off utilities if authorities instruct you to do so or if you suspect damaged lines. If you do turn off your utilities, do not turn them on again by yourself. You will need a professional to turn them back on.

Fire Extinguisher

Keep a fire extinguisher where you can get to it easily and quickly. Have one on each level of your home, if possible. Be sure everyone knows how to use it, what types of fire it puts out and where it is kept.

Smoke Alarms

Install smoke alarms on each level of your home, especially near the bedroom. Follow local codes and manufacturer's instructions about installation requirements. Test them monthly and change the batteries once a year.

Escape Routes and Safe Spots

Determine the best escape routes out of your home. Find two ways out of each room. Also, find the safe spots in your home for each type of disaster. For example, if a tornado approaches, an interior room without windows on the lowest level is your best safe spot.

For more information, visit these Web sites:

These links will open in a new browser window.

- [The Federal Emergency Management Agency](http://www.fema.gov)
www.fema.gov
- [American Red Cross](http://www.redcross.org)
www.redcross.org

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