



Are You Ready for an Emergency?

By Ralph Morris, MD, MPH

Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, wildfires, pandemics¹, disease outbreaks, terrorist attacks... We may not like to think about the disasters that can befall us, but these potential events warrant our preparedness. September is [National Preparedness Month](#), and a new infographic—[The Power of Preparedness](#)—from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that over 60 percent of Americans do not have an emergency plan that they have discussed with their household. Are you in that camp? According to [the 2014 Federal Emergency Management Agency report, "Preparedness in America"](#), the percentage of people taking recommended preparedness actions in 2011 remains largely unchanged since 2007.



Taking the First Steps

Where you live determines the type of emergency you may be most at risk of experiencing. If you live in a coastal area, your greatest risk could be hurricanes. Flooding may be a serious risk if you live near water, in a flood zone, for example. You may live in a tectonically active area, in which case earthquakes are a concern. Residents in or near forested areas subject to drought may count wildfires among their greatest risks. Do you live in a metropolitan area and have close contact with many people on a daily basis in your commute to work or as part of your job? Diseases can spread quickly among people in close contact. Unfortunately, by their nature, terrorist attacks are random and unpredictable.

Once you have determined your greatest risk factors, preparedness activities become clearer. That said, every household could benefit by storing and regularly updating:

- **Water and food** to last each person at least 3 days (more is likely appropriate for many emergencies; for example, a pandemic may require 6-8 weeks of supplies).
- **Fuel** for cooking, e.g., propane or charcoal.
- **Medications** and first aid supplies for each person to last at least 3 days (include prescription medications and over-the-counter medications for treating fever, flu, colds, etc.).

¹ A pandemic is a widespread disease outbreak, affecting large areas, such as an entire country, continent, or even the entire world.

- **Unscented chlorine bleach** or appropriate water treatment tablets for preparing safe drinking water after stored water supplies have been depleted.
- **Flashlights and radios** (and the appropriate batteries to power them unless they are solar-powered or operated by a hand-crank).
- **Candles and matches.**
- **Emergency cash** (Think: What if ATMs were inoperable?).
- **A family plan** previously discussed with family members including routes to take/not take to get home and meeting sites in case getting home is not possible.
- **A pet plan** which includes identification tags, food, water, and a safe place for them in the event of an emergency.

Customizing Your Emergency Plan

Build on the basic recommendations above with your unique circumstances in mind.

- If you take life-sustaining prescription medication, discuss with your doctor the possibility of storing an emergency supply of medication in your home.
- If you anticipate that a forest fire or earthquake could force you to leave your home, have an emergency “go bag” ready that contains at least one change of clothing, medicines, personal hygiene and other items you will likely need to survive away from home, such as your cell phone charger.
- A face mask can help protect you during dust storms and from volcanic ash or ash from wildfires.
- Is your only means of transportation from your community by personal vehicle? Keep your vehicle in good repair and its gas tank at least 50 percent full. On the other hand, if it is unlikely that you will have to evacuate, but you know that losing power is a real risk, you might want to invest in a portable generator and plan how you will safely store propane or gasoline.
- Long, insulated underwear is essential in extremely cold weather disasters when gas and electricity go out for extended periods of time.
- How do elderly and incapacitated neighbors and relatives fit into your emergency plans?
- How about a bad flu season? The Water Quality & Health Council developed “[Dr. Ralph’s Flu Preparedness Closet](#)” to list the items needed to stay healthy and secure during a pandemic flu

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Emergency Water

Water is one of the “non-negotiables” of our daily survival. According to www.ready.gov/water, each person in a household requires one gallon of safe water per day for drinking and sanitation.

Either purchase commercially bottled water to store, or prepare your own containers of water using food grade water storage containers (visit surplus or camping supply stores or their websites). Alternatively, use 2-liter plastic drink bottles that are thoroughly cleaned.

Sanitize plastic drink bottles with a solution made by adding 1 teaspoon of unscented chlorine bleach to one quart of water. Rinse well and fill each 2- liter bottle with tap water. If your tap water is treated by a water utility, nothing else is required. If the tap water comes from a well or other untreated source, add 2 drops of non-scented chlorine bleach to the water. Let the water stand for at least 30 minutes before using. Tightly close each bottle (don’t touch the inside of the cap), write the date on a label and store in a cool, dark place. Water that has not been commercially bottled should be replaced every 6 months.

One easy way to get started on the path to preparedness is to [download the FEMA App](#) to your smart phone. You will receive weather alerts and be able to access critical information in the event of an emergency, including the locations of emergency shelters. Our hope this National Preparedness Month is that more Americans will see preparedness as a worthwhile and potentially life-saving activity.

Ralph Morris, MD, MPH, is a Physician and Preventive Medicine and Public Health official living in Bemidji, MN.