

This September marks America's fifth annual Emergency Preparedness Month, a yearly campaign designed by the Department of Homeland Security to educate citizens as to the importance of preparing for a possible disaster. At the core of this outreach program is a list of four simple actions that everyone should take in order to be prepared for an emergency: Get a Kit, Make a Plan, Be Informed, and Get Involved. This year Emergency Preparedness Online will be examining each of these four steps.

BE PREPARED:

Stay Informed

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

One of the most frightening aspects of an emergency situation is the uncertainty that accompanies it. A lack of information combined with the sudden onset of the emergency combines to leave a person feeling powerless - hardly the best state of mind in which to face a crisis. The time to gather knowledge regarding disasters is before they occur. That way you will be mentally empowered to handle the different challenges that a sudden emergency can bring. Panic and fear tend to spread like wildfire during a disaster. One person with information and confidence can bring strength and calm to a family or group. It has been said that knowledge is power. This is never more evident than during an emergency.

First things to do

Each emergency situation is different due to varying circumstances such as time, location, injuries, the availability of electricity, etc. However, there are basic guidelines that can help one navigate through any crisis that might occur. In any emergency situation, it is critical that you stay calm. Although it might be easier said than done, it is essential that you do not give in to panic because you will need to think logically and call upon your common sense. The next thing to do in any emergency is to assess your situation to determine the level of danger involved. Make the decision as to whether it is safer to evacuate or shelter-in-

place. Then, if possible, call for help using 911 and clearly explain what you know about the situation. Provide first aid for any injured people. Move anyone who is injured away from further danger. Gather as much information about the emergency as possible, without putting yourself in danger. Pass the information on to emergency responders when they arrive on the scene.

Learn from the experts

A good way to begin educating yourself about emergency preparedness is to learn about possible disasters that are associated with the area where you live. Find out what emergency plans have been created by local and state officials in your region. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security offers an interactive guide to community and state information at <http://www.ready.gov/america/local/index.html>

This online resource is presented as a U.S. map which you can click on to find contact information for local and state emergency management agencies in your specific area. By knowing what kind of emergencies or disasters have happened in your area in the past, you can be more prepared for what might be coming in the future. While you should try to be as prepared as possible for *any* emergency that might happen, it makes sense to take extra steps to prepare for emergencies that are common to your geographical location.

Homeland Security also supports a grassroots effort, known as the Citizen Corps. The Citizens Corp provides opportunities for citizens to get emergency response training, participate in community exercises and volunteer to support local first responders. To find out more about this organization you can contact your nearest Citizen Corps Council by visiting www.citizencorps.gov

Information on the Internet

Throughout the last decade, the increasing awareness about the importance of emergency planning and the growth of the Internet, have both become a part of our national consciousness. Nearly every American household has instant access to a vast library of data via online search engines. Emergency Information

Online was established five years ago in order to gather the most informative preparedness sites together for the purpose of providing a one-stop directory for anyone interested in learning about disaster readiness. Visit www.emergencypreparednessonline.org and take the time to read the website's safety and emergency preparedness articles, before an emergency hits. Other online resources include:

Are you Ready

<http://www.fema.gov/areyouready/>

This downloadable guide is FEMA's most comprehensive source on individual, family, business and community preparedness. It provides a step-by-step approach to disaster preparedness by educating the reader on how to get informed about local emergency plans, how to identify local hazards, and how to develop and maintain an emergency communications plan and disaster supplies kit.

Disaster News Network

<http://www.disasternews.net/>

Disaster News Network (DNN) is a not-for-profit news service that tells the story of disaster response and suggests appropriate ways the public can help survivors. It also facilitates information sharing among disaster responders. Disaster News Network, which receives most of its funding from disaster response organizations, also covers related special topics such as preparedness and mitigation, public violence, environmental hazards, and terrorist disasters.

Red Cross

<http://www.redcross.org/pubs/dspubs/cdelist.html>

The Red Cross Disaster Services Publications is an online directory of community disaster education materials listed by hazard, which include chemical emergencies, drought, earthquakes, fire, flood, heat waves, hurricanes, thunderstorms, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, and winter storms.

Information for people with disabilities

According to the National Organization on Disability (NOD), of the 54 million Americans with disabilities, 61% have not made plans to quickly and safely evacuate their homes, in the event of an emergency. Also, 46% of people with disabilities do not know whom to contact about emergency plans for their community. Organizations such as NOD, Emergency Preparedness Online, Disability Funders Network, Red Cross, and Ready.gov are dedicated to improving these unsatisfactory statistics. It is vital that people with individual needs be ready to face any emergency.

The Red Cross recommends some basic first steps for people with disabilities to prepare for a disaster and its subsequent consequences. Think about the types of emergencies that could occur in your area and consider what your environment might be like after one occurs. Decide what you will be able to do for yourself and what assistance you may need before, during and after a disaster. Contact a support network of family, friends, relatives, neighbors, roommates and co-workers who could assist you at a moment's notice. Discuss your special needs with them, including evacuation plans and medical information lists, which should contain the names and numbers of your doctors, your medications, dosage instructions, and any existing conditions. Always keep at least a week's supply of medications available. If you undergo treatments administered by a clinic or hospital, ask your provider how to prepare for a disruption caused by a disaster. For more information, the Red Cross has produced a comprehensive emergency readiness guide designed to help people who have physical, visual, auditory, or cognitive disabilities. It is called Disaster Preparedness for People with Disabilities and is available to download at <http://www.prepare.org/disabilities/disability.pdf>.