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National Preparedness Month: September 2008

BE PREPARED, No Matter Where You Live

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

No matter what area of the county you live in, there are risks of certain emergencies. While you shouldn't rule out any type of event by believing "that could never happen here", it is obvious that particular disasters are more common in certain areas of the county. While people living in the Interior Plains should be wary of tornados, people in coastal communities must know what to do in case of hurricanes or floods. Part of being prepared is staying informed about the different emergencies that are most likely to occur in your area.

The Interior Plains

The Interior Plains of the United States extend over 1,000 miles, from the Appalachians to the Rocky Mountains. Within these vast boundaries there exists an area with the unofficial yet ominous name of "Tornado Alley." Tornado Alley is commonly defined as the location where the strongest tornadoes happen most frequently—usually stretching from Northern Texas up through Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and into South Dakota. It is important to remember that tornadoes can occur in many parts of the country (and the world) – but in the U.S., most occur in the Interior Plains during the spring and summer months.

Knowing exactly what to do when you see a tornado, or when you hear a tornado warning, can help save your life and the lives of your family.

- Make a tornado emergency plan with your family. Discuss how and where to seek shelter in each room of the house. Be sure that all members of the family know where to locate first-aid kits, fire extinguishers, and switches to turn off gas and electricity. Pick one location where your family will go to take shelter. If you do not have a shelter specifically for tornados, family members should gather in the basement, away from windows. Food and water supplies should be left in whichever location you choose.

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- Know if your town or county has a tornado warning system – in most cases, it is a distinct siren. Make sure that all members of your family, even children, know to take shelter *immediately* after hearing a tornado warning.
- Tornadoes can arrive suddenly and without warning. Know the weather signs for a tornado approaching: dark or green colored skies, dark low-lying clouds, large hailstones, or a loud roar. If you see a tornado or any of these signs, even if you haven't heard a tornado siren, *take shelter immediately*.
- If there is no shelter available and you are outside, lay flat in the lowest ditch around. Wherever you are, you should always shield your head with your hands. If you are in a car, motorhome or other vehicle – *get out!* You are safer outside, laying flat in a ditch, than in a vehicle.

Coastal Communities

All Atlantic and Gulf coastal areas are subject to hurricanes, as the U.S. Pacific Islands are to typhoons and tropical storms. Because of a limited number of evacuation routes, hurricanes are especially dangerous to barrier islands such as the Outer Banks of North Carolina and areas like the Florida Keys and New Orleans, Louisiana. Although rarely struck by hurricanes, parts of the Southwest and the Pacific Coast can experience heavy rains and floods from the remnants of hurricanes coming up the coast from Mexico. If you live in an area prone to hurricanes or flooding, you should know the basic steps to take:

- If you live in a high-risk area, take precautions to flood-proof your home, such as elevating your furnace or electric panel, installing check valves on your drains and sealing walls with a waterproofing compound. As always, have an emergency kit stored with food, water, batteries, medication, and any other supplies you might need.
- If a hurricane or major storm is imminent, monitor for official bulletins of the storm's progress via radio, TV or NOAA Weather Radio. They will tell you whether you should be preparing to evacuate or to shelter in place.

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- If you are instructed to evacuate, do not ignore the order! Quickly gather essential items and if you have time, turn off gas, electricity, and unplug any appliances. Follow the designated evacuation routes, even if you think you know a better way. You never know if other roads may be blocked or dangerous, so follow the orders of officials who will steer you clear of these things.
- If you are instructed to shelter in place, take refuge in a small interior room or closet. Keep away from windows and doors. If the area is flooded, do not go near water. Moving water might carry you away (it is much stronger than it looks!), and standing water could be contaminated or electrically charged from downed power lines.

Rural Communities

Rural communities exist all over the United States and differ greatly economically and geographically. They are especially prone to different types of disasters, and many times emergencies in rural communities can be more life threatening simply due to the fact that there are fewer people in a greater area. People living in rural areas often have limited access to hospitals and emergency medical services than their urban counterparts. Not only might there be fewer people to work as hospital employees, but simply getting a patient to a hospital can take much longer than in an urban or suburban area. The solution to preparedness in rural areas is more of a community effort than an individual effort. Communities must make emergency planning a priority with increased funding and education.

Rural communities must concentrate on clarification and communications of roles, relationships and responsibilities between health agencies, law enforcement, first responders, and citizens. Rural communities must develop plans and conduct drills as a realistic test of their capacities. These drills will help not only to prepare citizens for what might happen during any given emergency, but to help emergency planners to locate problematic areas and work to improve plans.

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Regional Preparedness Resources:

Tornadoes

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/tornadoes/>

The Center for Disease Control's Department of Health and Human Services posts a website that offers free tornado preparedness information and links.

Floods

<http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/emergencypreparedness/guides/floods.html>

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration posts an informative webpage about preparing for flood conditions and responding to them effectively. It is free and features answers to frequently asked questions to help workers understand how floods and flood response may affect their health and safety.

About the Authors

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Article inquiries welcome. On request, we can provide feature-length articles tailored to your audience and requirements. **Please contact John Cavanagh at Bridge Multimedia: (212) 213-3740 or jcavanagh@bridgemultimedia.com.**