

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, Stay Informed, Get Involved. This year Emergency Preparedness Online will be examining each of these four steps.

National Preparedness Month – September 2008:

BE PREPARED:

Make a Plan

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

Whether it's regarding your career, social life, or simply the domestic chores - nothing gets done properly unless there is a plan in place. A good, solid plan is at the heart of every accomplishment. Emergency preparedness is no exception. In fact, that is when a plan is most needed. There is no need to constantly dwell on the possibility of a catastrophe or live every day fearing a disaster. In fact, that is a waste of time and energy. However, dedicating a few hours towards taking a hard, realistic look at potential emergency situations, - and planning for them - is time well spent. It could literally save your life. As you begin to consider your emergency plans, keep in mind that disasters can strike anytime, without warning. It is likely that your family will be in separate places, if an emergency occurs. It is important to figure out how to contact one another in order to get back together and face the crisis. Obviously it is essential that a family be involved in emergency planning, together.

Family Preparedness

Call a meeting with your family and in a calm, straightforward way, talk about the importance of preparing for a possible disaster. Educate your children about the dangers of fire, severe weather, and other possible emergencies. Explain what do during each. Choose two spots to meet. One should be right in front of the home in the event of a sudden disaster such as a fire. The other, in a different neighborhood in case it is not possible to return to your home. Make certain that

everyone remembers the address and telephone number of the second location – a good choice would be the home of a relative. Listen to your children’s thoughts, concerns, and ideas on the subject of emergency preparedness. Working together like a team and sharing responsibilities will help them to feel involved. When children are pro-active regarding a situation, they are less likely to be frightened of it.

Should I stay or should I go?

Good emergency planning means taking into account different possible scenarios. Your first important decision, during an emergency, is whether to remain where you are or evacuate. Use whatever information is at hand, combined with your common sense and previous emergency education, to assess your immediate danger. If possible, check TV, radio, or online news reports for information or official instructions. If you are specifically instructed to evacuate, it is essential that you do so, immediately. Plan to have several destinations (in different directions) ready, so you will have options during the crisis. If you have a car, remember to keep a half tank of gas in it at all times. This way you will be ready in case emergency travel is required. Familiarize yourself with alternate routes to get to your planned destination. If you don’t have a car, plan on how you will leave the area if necessary.

During an emergency there are situations when the best course of action is to stay where you are. In some emergencies it is necessary to create a barrier between yourself and outside air, which is contaminated. This is called ‘sealing the room’ or ‘sheltering in place’ and it is important to do if you are warned that the outside air is contaminated, or you notice a lot of debris in the air. First, get your family and pets inside as quickly as possible. Lock your doors and close windows, air vents, and fireplace dampers. Remember to shut off fans, air conditioning, and forced air heating systems. Take your emergency supply kit and go to an interior room, preferably with few windows. Seal off all of the windows, doors and air vents with plastic sheeting and duct tape. If there is damage to your home or you are instructed to turn off your utilities, locate the shut-off valves for your gas, water, and electricity. Teach members of your family

how to turn off these utilities. Remember, once you shut off your gas, a professional must turn it on again. Don't do it yourself!

Make a list and check it twice

The Department of Health and Human Services recommends planning for emergencies by preparing a checklist that includes items such as:

- Post emergency telephone numbers by phones (fire, police, ambulance, etc.).
- Teach children how and when to call 911 or your local Emergency Medical Services number for emergency help.
- Determine the best escape routes from your home. Find two ways out of each room.
- Find the safe spots in your home for each type of disaster.
- Show each family member how and when to turn off the water, gas, and electricity at the main switches.
- Check if you have adequate insurance coverage.
- Teach each family member how to use the fire extinguisher, and show them where it's kept.
- Install smoke detectors on each level of your home, especially near bedrooms.
- Conduct a home hazard hunt.
- Stock emergency supplies and assemble a disaster supplies kit.
- Take a Red Cross first aid and CPR class.

Once you have prepared a thorough list, double check it to make certain that you are disaster ready! Now that you have taken the time to prepare yourself and your family, you must all take an active role to ensure that everyone remains familiar with the plan, especially young children who can be prone to forget. Give your children a quiz every six months so they remember what to do. Reward them with a little prize if they recall everything. Have an occasional fire or evacuation drill. Replace your emergency water supply every three months and your food supply every six months.

The Safe and Well Website

The Red Cross developed the safe and Well Website after the disastrous 2005 hurricane season. This online resource allows people in a disaster area to let their friends and family know their situation. A person can log onto this site and leave a message as to whether they are safe and well at a shelter, hotel, or at home, and that they will contact their loved ones as soon as they can. People who are worried about their family members in a disaster area can access the Safe and Well website to view these messages. Users will be required to enter either the name and telephone number, or the name and complete address, of the person they wish to check on. During large-scale disasters, there is telephone-based assistance, via the 1-866-GET-INFO hotline, for people who live within the affected areas and do not have Internet access, but wish to register on the Safe and Well website. (<https://disastersafe.redcross.org/>)

Emergency planning for individuals with disabilities or special needs

Planning and foresight are essential elements of emergency preparedness for families, children, the elderly, and people with special needs. The American Red Cross produces a booklet called Disaster Preparedness for People With Disabilities, designed to help people who have physical, visual, auditory, or cognitive disabilities prepare for natural disasters and their consequences.

Recommendations include:

Know what kinds of disasters could happen in your area and consider what your environment might look like after one occurs. Certain resources or utilities may not be available and conditions could hamper your independence.

Complete a personal assessment. Decide what you will be able to do for yourself and what assistance you may need before, during and after a disaster (based on the disrupted environment, your capabilities and your limitations).

Create a personal 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.

Make an emergency information list so others will know whom to call if they find you unconscious, unable to speak or if they need to help you evacuate quickly. Include the names and numbers of out-of-town contacts, as well as everyone in your network.

Compile a medical information list that contains the names and numbers of your doctors, your medications, dosage instructions, and any existing conditions. Make note of your adaptive equipment, allergies, and any communication difficulties you may have.

Keep at least a seven-day supply of medications on hand. Ask your doctor or pharmacist what you should do if you cannot immediately get more. If you undergo treatments administered by a clinic or hospital, ask your provider how to prepare for a disruption caused by a disaster.

Identify evacuation routes and safe places to go during a disaster.

Complete a checklist to make sure that your personal disaster plan is comprehensive. Be sure to include your medical needs, evacuation routes, care plans for your service animals, an alternative place to stay, etc.

Keep a disaster supply kit in your home, car, workplace or anywhere you may spend your time. Include such items as food, water, a first aid kit, adaptive equipment, batteries, and supplies for your pets or service animals.

Make your home or office safer by checking hallways, stairwells, doorways, windows and other areas for hazards that may keep you from safely leaving a building during an emergency. Secure or remove furniture and objects that may block your path.

About The Authors

John Cavanagh is Communications Director for Bridge Multimedia and Chief Researcher for Emergency Preparedness Online.

Anne Malia writes about technology and emergency preparedness for people with special needs and has contributed to the production of EmergencyPrepOnline.org and EdTechOnline.org.

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.**