

# Disaster and Emergency Preparedness for Older Adults

A Practical Guide to Help Plan, Respond and Recover



## Be Red Cross Ready

Prepare so you can protect.



**American  
Red Cross**

A disaster or emergency that can directly affect your daily life can happen at any time, sometimes without warning. Thankfully, there are things you can do to be prepared, respond safely and help speed your recovery. This guide is designed to give you some practical tips about how to plan and prepare for your needs in a disaster or emergency.

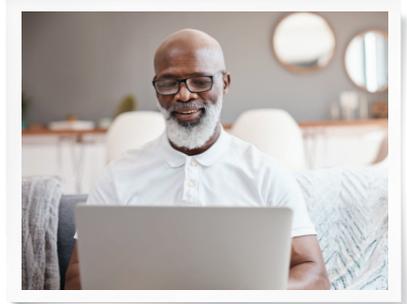
No two people are the same. This guide will help you assess your abilities and potential conditions you may need to consider in the event of a disaster. You'll also be provided with the key actions and steps to take before, during and after a disaster or emergency.

# BEFORE A DISASTER OR AN EMERGENCY

Prepare and Get Ready Now

## Get Informed

- **Identify likely emergencies:** Learn about the types of disasters or emergencies that could happen in your community.
- **Learn about your community and housing response plans:** Find out about your community's guidance, response plans, evacuation routes and all available resources for preparing and responding to disasters. If you live in housing such as an apartment building or an assisted living residence, find out about the management's guidance and plans to prepare and respond to disasters or emergencies.
- **Sign up for alerts and warnings:** Learn how to receive national and local alerts and warnings. Understand the meaning of a watch and a warning and learn the actions you'll take for disasters that are likely in your area.<sup>1</sup>
- **Get trained:** Learn first aid, CPR and the response skills for local disasters that may occur. For most disasters, there are specific actions you can take to help protect yourself from the impact of that disaster.



For example, the guidance for an earthquake is to “drop, cover and hold on” to protect yourself from falling and from falling debris. In addition to the basic guidance, there might be alternate actions if you are in bed, stay in bed and cover yourself to protect yourself from falling debris, or if you are in a wheelchair, lock its wheels and cover to protect yourself from falling debris. (see web site for training and protective actions for specific disasters)<sup>2</sup>

## Assess Your Needs

- **Understand how your medical, physical and cognitive needs may affect your ability** to respond to a disaster or emergency.<sup>3</sup>
- **Think about how you would respond:** Consider needs you may have if the power went out, if you had to stay home for two weeks or more or if you had to quickly evacuate your home or community.
- **Take an inventory** of items, like assistive devices, you rely on at home that you’d need to take with you if you evacuated; include model information. List all items that require electricity—such as refrigerated medicines, a CPAP device or power wheelchair. List all devices to take with you in an evacuation and consider light-weight or portable alternatives where possible. Plan for battery or generator backup for all items and



where you'll go if these power sources won't last for an extended power outage.

## Build Your Support Network

- **Identify helpers:** Include family, friends, neighbors, caregivers and care providers to help build your network and help you develop and support your plan.<sup>4</sup>
- **Meet with your helpers to plan together:** Talk about what kind of help you'll need and how your helpers can assist you. You may also be able to help others too.
- **Make a contact information list for your helpers** and plan how you'll communicate regularly and during a disaster when some communications may be disrupted.<sup>5</sup>

## Develop Your Plan

- **Plan for local disasters:** Consider all potential disasters in your area that could affect you including home fires, natural disasters and power outages. Plan for the actions you'll take for each.<sup>6</sup>
- **Plan to stay or go:** Plan for disasters where you'll need to stay home at least two weeks or evacuate. Consider what you'll need in different types of disasters.
- **Plan for help to stay in your home:** Plan for how you'll meet your needs if caregivers or care providers aren't able to come to your home and/or you can't get

access to essential medical and community services. You may need a plan to evacuate before a disaster, if possible, to maintain access to these supports or identify a nearby friend or neighbor who can learn how to help you.

- **Plan for help to evacuate:** If you'll need help evacuating or have medical devices that require power, plan for help. Find out if there are local registries and sign up so local responders will be aware of your needs.
- **Assess your power needs:** If you require power to operate medical devices or keep medicines cold, talk with your care providers and an electrician or your utility company to make a backup power plan.
- **Learn how to turn off the water, gas and electricity** supply to your home. If your gas is turned off, only a gas utility professional may turn it back on.
- **Prepare for home fires:** Make sure you have smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors on every floor of your home, inside bedrooms and outside of sleeping areas. Know two ways out of every room and the assistance you may need to evacuate safely.<sup>7</sup>
- **Know your property or renter's insurance:** Make sure you have disaster-specific coverage for your area, and the amount



of coverage is enough for you. Typically, homeowner insurance does not cover flooding or earthquakes and these disasters require separate policies.

- **Protect your property:** You may be able to strengthen your home and create protection against many disasters such as a flood or earthquake. Consult a trained professional and consider ways to protect your property from disasters in your area.<sup>8</sup>
- **Review, practice and refresh** your support network, your plan, your supplies and your documents at least twice a year.

## Create a Communication Plan

- **Share your plan and contact information with your support network:** Plan more than one way to get in touch in case the disaster disrupts power, phone networks or internet access. Identify someone local to help with communication to local officials such as first responders, doctors or building managers. Identify someone outside your local area who may be able to assist with communication when local access is disrupted.
- **Learn how to use alternate communication methods:** If available, use mobile phones to send texts, internet for emails or internet phone services.



- **Write down phone numbers for emergency services:** utilities, service providers, medical providers, veterinarians, insurance companies, your building or homeowner association managers, home repair professionals and other services.<sup>9</sup>

## Gather Supplies You'll Need

- **Prepare emergency supplies to stay at home and a portable kit of supplies for evacuation:** Include basics such as food and water, first aid kit, flashlight, whistle, cash, a change of clothes and sturdy shoes. Make sure you have phone chargers, batteries and battery backup plans for all medical devices.<sup>10</sup>
- **Personalize your kit to address medical and personal needs:** Prepare a backup supply of medication for at least 30 days or more. Include additional items such as an extra pair of prescription eyewear, medical devices or any assistive devices such as a cane or other comfort items.
- **Gather enough items for yourself and everyone in your household** including pets and service animals for at least two weeks for staying at home. Have a lightweight kit for at least three days for an evacuation and supplies for at least 24 hours if you have a car.<sup>11</sup>



## Prepare the Documents You'll Need

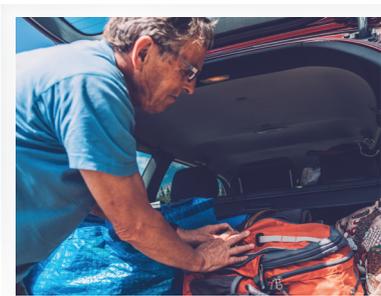
- **Locate important documents:** Copy or scan all important documents including household identification (such as ID, social security card, driver's license, marriage license), financial and legal (deeds, loans, credit cards, banking, wills, property insurance) and medical (see below). Keep in mind, some of these are required for recovery financial assistance. To see a complete list of documents to save, go to [redcross.org/OlderAdults](https://www.redcross.org/OlderAdults) for the FEMA Emergency Financial First Aid Kit.<sup>12</sup> Take the time to learn more about financial preparedness.<sup>13</sup>
- **Gather medical information:** Keep an up-to-date list of your conditions, allergies, medications and dosages, doctors, caregivers and health insurance cards. In addition, make copies of your written prescriptions before having them filled, or ask your doctor or pharmacist for a printed copy of all your prescribed medications—having this information on hand may make it easier to replace after a disaster.
- **Keep and share a contact list of people in your support network.**
- **Keep a copy of your plans.**
- **Safeguard documents:** Consider keeping paper documents in a waterproof box or safe, store electronic copies in a password protected format in a secure cloud-based file, or a removable flash drive or with a trusted family member.



# DURING AN EMERGENCY

## Know How to Respond

- **Stay informed:** Monitor TV, radio and emergency alerts for disaster watches and warnings<sup>14</sup>
  - **If there is a watch issued,** review your plan for that disaster and make any necessary changes in your activities to make sure you can quickly get to a safer place and can protect yourself.
  - **If there's a warning issued,** act immediately to follow your plan for that disaster.
- **Know how to take action to protect yourself:** If there are immediate dangers, use the response skills you've learned to protect yourself during that disaster.
- **Stay or go?** Be ready to stay at home or leave right away in case you need to evacuate. Know how you'll decide whether to stay or go including who will help you decide. If the power is out for an extended time or you don't have adequate air conditioning in a heat wave, or adequate heating during extreme cold, consider evacuating to an appropriate location.



- **Locate public shelters:** Relief organizations, like the American Red Cross, may open shelters if a disaster affects a large number of people or the emergency is expected to last several days. Be prepared to go to a shelter if:
  - Your area is without electrical power.
  - Police or other local officials tell you to evacuate.
  - Your home's been severely damaged.
- **Ask for help** and tell people what you need.



# AFTER A DISASTER OR EMERGENCY

## Know How to Recover

- **Return home safely:** Monitor news from authorities and only return home when authorities say it's safe to do so. Report broken gas, sewer or water lines, and loose or dangling power wires to your local municipality.
- **Work with trusted sources:** Seek out resources and support from trusted sources such as the Red Cross and FEMA; be aware of scams and take caution when sharing personal information.
- **Manage property damage:** If there's evidence of structural damage to your home, get a review by a trained inspector before you go back in.
- **If there's been an extended power outage,** throw out food that may have been above 40 degrees for 2 hours or more.
- **Be aware of the risk of electrocution:** If there's water in the home, don't go in until you're sure the power is off at the main switch.
- **Only use a generator outdoors and away from windows.**
- **Document any property damage and contact your insurance** to file a claim.
- **If you're clearing debris or cleaning,** follow safety precautions, wear protective clothing and always work with someone for safety.
- **Lean on your support network** to help you recover.

## TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS

### How to Help With Planning and Response

- **Understand what you may be expected and required to do** to assist someone you support, including helping to develop their plan, prepare their disaster supplies and documents, sign them up for local registries, support their evacuation, etc.
- **Ensure you've received training in first aid and CPR**, how to use or operate their assistive devices or medical equipment and how to support their personal care needs.
- **Know how to teach others to communicate effectively** with the person you care for who may require hearing, visual, speech or other communication adaptations.
- **Know how to provide additional emotional and behavioral support**, especially to help a person living with dementia or active mental health issues.
- **Have a current picture of the person you're caring for**, in case you get separated, and a copy of their essential medical and treatment information to access the right care. It may be helpful to discuss getting the person you support a personal or medical ID bracelet.

# RESOURCES

## **1, 2, 6, 14 Prepare for Specific Disasters**

For more information on what to do during a disaster, go to [redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies.html](https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies.html)

## **3 Assess Your Needs Checklist**

Information on specific items to consider for your kit based on personal needs, go to [redcross.org/OlderAdults](https://www.redcross.org/OlderAdults)

## **4 Building your Support Network**

Information on building your Support Network is available at [redcross.org/OlderAdults](https://www.redcross.org/OlderAdults)

## **5, 9 Emergency Contact List**

For more information on resources for completing your emergency contact list, go to [redcross.org/OlderAdults](https://www.redcross.org/OlderAdults)

## **7 Home Fire Preparedness**

For more information on home fire preparedness, go to [redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/fire.html](https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/fire.html)

## **8 Property Mitigation**

For information on preparing your home for a disaster, go to [redcross.org/OlderAdults](https://www.redcross.org/OlderAdults)

## **10 Basic Supplies**

To see a starter list of items for your kit, go to [redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/survival-kit-supplies.html](https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/survival-kit-supplies.html)

## <sup>11, 12</sup> **Preparing Your Documents Checklist**

For more information on compiling important documents, go to [redcross.org/OlderAdults](https://www.redcross.org/OlderAdults)

## <sup>13</sup> **Financial Preparedness**

To learn more about how to be prepared financially for a disaster, go to [redcross.org/get-help/disaster-relief-and-recovery-services/recovering-financially.html](https://www.redcross.org/get-help/disaster-relief-and-recovery-services/recovering-financially.html)

---

For more information, read “Closing the Gaps: Advancing Disaster Preparedness, Response and Recovery for Older Adults” available at [redcross.org/OlderAdults](https://www.redcross.org/OlderAdults)

Special thanks to the members of the American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council for their dedication and contribution:

**Samir K. Sinha**, MD, DPhil, FRCPC, AGSF Member, American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council and Preparedness and Disaster Health Sub-Council; Director of Geriatrics, Sinai Health System and University Health Network, Toronto, Canada; Assistant Professor, Department of Medicine, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine; Associate Professor, Departments of Medicine, Family and Community Medicine, and the Institute of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation, University of Toronto

**Jacqueline T. Snelling**, Ed.M., Harvard; Member, American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council and Preparedness and Disaster Health Sub-Council; FEMA Senior Advisor, Preparedness (ret.)

---



**American  
Red Cross**

### **Mission**

The American Red Cross prevents and alleviates human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors.

**Be Red Cross Ready**

*Prepare so you can protect.*