

Evacuation

Evacuations are more common than many people realize. Hundreds of times each year, transportation and industrial accidents release harmful substances, forcing thousands of people to leave their homes. Fires and floods cause evacuations even more frequently. And almost every year, people along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts evacuate in the face of approaching hurricanes.

When community evacuations become necessary, local officials provide information to the public through the media. In some circumstances other warning methods, such as sirens or telephone calls, are also used. Government agencies, the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, and other disaster relief organizations provide emergency shelter and supplies. To be prepared for an emergency, you should have enough water, food, clothing and emergency supplies to last at least three days. In a catastrophic emergency, you might need to be self-sufficient for even longer.

The amount of time you have to evacuate will depend on the disaster. If the event can be monitored, like a hurricane, you might have a day or two to get ready. However, many disasters allow no time for people to gather even the most basic necessities. This is why you should prepare now.

Planning for evacuation

1. Ask your local emergency management office about community evacua-

tion plans. Learn evacuation routes. If you do not own a car, make transportation arrangements with friends or your local government.

2. Talk with your household about the possibility of evacuation. Plan where you would go if you had to leave the community. Determine how you would get there. In your planning, consider different scales of evacuations. In a hurricane, for example, entire counties would evacuate, while much smaller area would be affected by a chemical release.
3. Plan a place to meet your household in case you are separated from one another in a disaster. Ask a friend outside your town to be the “checkpoint” so that everyone in the household can call that person to say they are safe.
4. Find out where children will be sent if schools are evacuated.
5. Assemble a disaster supplies kit. Include a battery-powered radio, flashlight, extra batteries, food, water and clothing. See the “Emergency Planning and Disaster Supplies” chapter for a complete list.
6. Keep fuel in your car if an evacuation seems likely. Gas stations may be closed during emergencies and unable to pump gas during power outages.
7. Know how to shut off your home’s electricity, gas and water supplies at main switches and valves. Have the tools you would need to do this (usually adjustable pipe and crescent wrenches).

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What to do when you are told to evacuate

Listen to a battery-powered radio and follow local instructions. If the danger is a chemical release and you are instructed to evacuate immediately, gather your household and go. Take one car per household when evacuating. This will keep your household together and reduce traffic congestion and delay. In other cases, you may have time to follow these steps:

1. Gather water, food, clothing, emergency supplies, and insurance and financial records. See the "Emergency Planning and Disaster Supplies" chapter for important information.
2. Wear sturdy shoes and clothing that provides some protection, such as long pants, long-sleeved shirts, and a cap.
3. Secure your home. Close and lock doors and windows. Unplug appliances. If a hard freeze is likely during your absence, take actions needed to prevent damage to water pipes by freezing weather, such as:
 - Turn off water main.
 - Drain faucets.
 - Turn off inside valves for external faucets and open the outside faucets to drain.
4. Turn off the main water valve and electricity, if instructed to do so.
5. Let others know where you are going.
6. Leave early enough to avoid being trapped by severe weather.
7. Follow recommended evacuation routes. Do not take shortcuts. They may be blocked. Be alert for washed-out roads and bridges. Do not drive into flooded areas. Stay away from downed power lines.

Disaster situations can be intense, stressful, and confusing. Should an evacuation be necessary, local authorities will do their best to notify the public, but do not depend entirely on this. Often, a disaster can strike with little or no warning, providing local authorities scant time to issue an evacuation order. Also, it is possible that you may not hear of an evacuation order due to communications or power failure or not listening to your battery-powered radio. Local authorities and meteorologists could also make mistakes, including underestimating an emergency or disaster situation. In the absence of evacuation instructions from local authorities, you should evacuate if you feel you and your household are threatened or endangered. Use pre-designated evacuation routes and let others know what you are doing and your destination.