

How to prepare for a disaster

Your guide to finding accurate information, emergency kits, evacuations, protecting your home, and more if you're at risk of a hurricane, wildfire, flood, or other disaster.

By Lyndsey Gilpin

Ideally, you'd have weeks or days to prepare for extreme weather. But the reality is, especially with floods, wildfires, and tornadoes, things change quickly. That's why it's critical to plan in advance to know where you will get reliable information, prepare an evacuation plan, and have all the materials that you may need if you lose power, your home is damaged, or you're waiting for help.

Here's a toolkit to help you get started.

Where to find accurate information

Many people find out about disasters in their area via social media. But it's important to make sure the information you're receiving is correct. Below is a list of reliable sources to check for emergency alerts, updates, and more.

Your local emergency manager: Your city or county has an emergency management department, which is part of the local government. Emergency managers are responsible for communicating with the public about disasters, managing rescue and response efforts, and coordinating between different agencies. They usually have an SMS-based emergency alert system, so sign up for those texts now. (Note: Some cities have multiple languages available, but most emergency alerts are only in English.) Many emergency management agencies are active on Facebook, so check there for updates as well.

If you're having trouble finding your local department, [you can search](#) for your state or territory. We also suggest typing your city or county name followed by "emergency management" into Google. In larger cities, it's often a separate agency; in smaller communities, fire chiefs or sheriff's offices may manage emergency response and alerts.

National Weather Service: This agency, called NWS, is part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, and offers information and updates on everything from wildfires to hurricanes to air quality. You can enter your zip code on [weather.gov](https://www.weather.gov) and customize your homepage to get the most updated weather information and [receive alerts](#) for a variety of

weather conditions. The NWS also has regional and local branches where you can [sign up for SMS alerts](#). [Local alerts in multiple languages](#) are available in some areas.

If you're in a rural area or somewhere that isn't highlighted on the agency's maps, keep an eye out for local alerts and evacuation orders. NWS may not have as much information ahead of time in these areas because there often aren't as many weather monitoring stations.

“Watch” versus “warning”: You'll often see meteorologists refer to storm or fire watches or warnings. If there is a “watch,” that means the conditions are ripe for extreme weather. A wildfire watch means “critical fire weather conditions are possible but not imminent or occurring,” according to NOAA. A warning, however, means the threat is more imminent and you should be prepared to take shelter or evacuate if told to. For instance, a wildfire warning is set when fire conditions are “ongoing or expected to occur shortly.”

You can track extreme weather via these websites:

- The [National Interagency Fire Center](#) tracks wildfires around the country.
- This [ArcGIS fire tracker](#) uses government data to pinpoint fire activity across the country.
- The [National Hurricane Center](#) tracks hurricanes in the Central Pacific, Eastern Pacific, and Atlantic oceans.
- The National Weather Service [active-alerts page](#) monitors severe weather by state, region, and type.

Local news: The local television news and social media accounts from verified news sources will have live updates during and after a storm. Meteorologists on your local news station use NWS weather data. Follow your local newspaper and television station on Facebook or other social media, or check their websites regularly. If you don't have cable, these stations often livestream online for free during severe weather.

Weather stations and apps: The Weather Channel, Accuweather, Apple Weather, and Google, which all rely on NWS weather data, will have information on major storms. That may not be the case for smaller-scale weather events, and you shouldn't rely on these apps to tell you if you need to evacuate or move to higher ground. Instead, check your local news broadcast on television or radio, or check NWS.

READ MORE: [What disasters are and how they're officially declared](#)

How to pack an emergency kit

As you prepare for a disaster, it's important to have an emergency kit ready in case you lose power or need to leave your home. [Review this checklist from the Federal Emergency](#)

[Management Agency](#), for what to pack so you can stay safe, hydrated, and healthy. (FEMA has these resources available in multiple languages [here](#).)

These can often be expensive to create, so contact your local disaster aid organizations, houses of worship, or charities to see if there are free or affordable kits available — or buy one or two items every time you're at the grocery store. Ideally, this will be packed well in advance of hurricane or fire season, so gather as much as you can ahead of time in case shelves are empty when a storm is on the way.

FEMA [has activities](#) for kids to make this process more fun; the [ASPCA](#) also has useful guidelines for people with pets.

Here are some of the most important things to have in your kit:

- A list of phone numbers for your city or county emergency services, police departments, local hospitals, and health departments
- Water (one gallon per person per day for several days)
- Food (at least a several-day supply of non-perishable food) and a can opener
- Medicines and documentation of your medical needs
- Identification and proof of residency documents (see a more detailed list below)
- A flashlight
- A battery-powered or hand crank radio
- Backup batteries
- Blanket(s) and sleeping bags
- Change of clothes and closed-toed shoes
- First aid kit ([The Red Cross](#) has a list of what to include)
- N-95 masks, hand sanitizer, and trash bags
- Wrench or pliers
- Cell phone with chargers and a backup battery
- If you have babies or children: diapers, wipes, and food or formula
- If you have pets: food, collar, leash, and any medicines needed

[Wirecutter](#), [Wired](#), [Popular Mechanics](#), and some other news outlets have “best of” lists for many of these items, where you can find different price points and features. You can also find [reviews on Consumer Reports](#).

Don't forget: Documents

One of the most important things to have in your emergency kit is documents you may need to prove your residence, demonstrate extent of damage, [and to vote](#). FEMA often requires you to provide these documents in order to receive financial assistance after a disaster. Keep these items in a water- and fire-proof folder or container. You can find more details about why you may need these documents [here](#).

- Government-issued ID, such as a drivers' license, for each member of your household

- Proof of citizenship or legal residency for each member of your household (passport, green card, etc.)
- Social Security card for each member of your household
- Documentation of your medical needs, including medications or special equipment (oxygen tanks, wheelchairs, etc.)
- Health insurance card
- Car title and registration documents
- Pre-disaster photos of the inside and outside of your house and belongings
- For homeowners: copies of your deed, mortgage information, and home insurance policy, if applicable
- For renters: a copy of your lease and renters insurance policy
- Financial documents such as a checkbook or voided check

Planning for people with disabilities

Disabled people have a right to all disaster alerts in a format that is accessible. The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies, a disability-led nonprofit focused on disasters, [has a list](#) of these rights. The organization also runs a hotline for any questions: (800) 626-4959 or hotline@disasterstrategies.org.

[FEMA has a list](#) of specific planning steps for people with disabilities. Some of these recommendations include:

- Contact your local emergency management office to ask about voluntary registries for people with disabilities to self-identify so they can access targeted assistance during emergencies and disasters.
- If you use medical equipment that requires electricity, ask your health care provider about what you may be able to do to keep it running during a power outage.
- Wear medical alert tags or bracelets. Also add pertinent medical information to your electronic devices.
- In your emergency kit, have your prescription information and medicines, as well as contact information for people who can help care for you or answer questions.

Power outage safety

You may experience a power outage before or during a disaster. Here are some ways to stay safe:

- Your utility company may alert you of changes, so sign up for texts, emails, or calls from them.
- If your power does go out, keep your refrigerator closed as much as possible and eat perishable food first. Get some coolers with ice if possible, and if you're in doubt about any food, throw it out.

- Unplug appliances and electronics you don't need, and use flashlights instead of candles to reduce the risk of fire.
- Do not use a gas stove to heat your home and do not use outdoor stoves inside. If you have a generator, keep it outside in a well ventilated area away from windows. [The Red Cross has more generator safety tips.](#)

READ MORE: [How to access food before, during, and after a disaster](#)

Planning an evacuation route

It is important to have a plan in case there's an evacuation order in your area, or if you decide you want to evacuate on your own. [FEMA](#) has a list of key things to know when making an evacuation plan.

- Choose several places you could go in an emergency — maybe a friend or family member's house in another city, or a hotel. Choose destinations in different directions so you have options. If you have pets, make sure the place you choose allows them, as shelters usually only allow service animals.
- Make sure you know several routes and other means of transportation out of your area, in case roads are closed.
- Keep a full tank of gas in your car if you know a disaster may be coming, and keep your emergency kit in your car or in an easily accessible place.
- Come up with a plan to stay in touch with members of your household in case you are separated. Check with your neighbors as well.
- Unplug electrical equipment, except for freezers and refrigerators, before you evacuate. If there's already damage to your home in any way, shut off water, gas, and electricity.

Always heed the advice of local officials when it comes to evacuations. Your state or county may have specific routes and plans in case there are mandatory evacuations. For instance, [Florida's emergency management division](#) has designated zones and routes across the state for hurricane evacuations. [Los Angeles County](#) has resources for different evacuation scenarios in case of wildfire.

Protecting and preparing your home

It's impossible to know what might happen to your home during a disaster, but there are many best practices to keep your belongings and property as safe as possible.

The list below contains tips from several sources, including FEMA and the [National Fire Protection Association](#), for protecting your home from wildfire.

- Equip an outdoor water source with a hose that can reach any area of your property.

- Create a fire-resistant zone that is free of leaves, debris, or flammable materials for at least 30 feet from your home.
- Clean roofs and gutters of dead leaves, debris, and pine needles.
- Clean debris from exterior attic vents and install 1/8-inch metal mesh screening to block embers.
- Move any flammable material, including mulch, flammable plants, leaves, pine needles, and firewood piles, away from walls. Remove anything stored underneath decks or porches.
- Designate a room that can be closed off from outside air. Close all doors and windows. Set up a portable air cleaner to keep indoor pollution levels low when smoky conditions exist.
- Use fire-resistant materials to build, renovate, or make repairs.

Below is a list of ways to protect your home from water and wind damage, gathered from [the National Flood Insurance Program](#) and local government sources.

- Move your most valued belongings to a high, safe place, such as an attic.
- Clear your gutters and downspouts when you know a big rain is coming, and make sure they're pointed downhill, away from your home.
- Clear storm drains and drainage ditches of debris.
- Elevate your utilities, including electrical panels, propane tanks, sockets, wiring, appliances, and heating systems, if possible, and anchor them in place.
- Get a sump pump if you are a homeowner. A working sump pump and a water alarm can minimize flood damage in your basement. Install a battery-operated backup pump in case the power goes out.
- Seal any cracks in your foundation with mortar, caulk, or hydraulic cement.
- Secure outdoor items so they don't blow or wash away.
- If you're in a hurricane-prone area, install storm shutters. There are many products for every budget; some are temporary and some are permanent.
- Secure loose roof shingles, which can create a domino effect if wind starts to take them off.

The list below contains tips from several sources, including FEMA and the U.S. Energy Department, on protecting your home from frigid temperatures.

- Clear debris and tree limbs, especially those hanging over your gutters or roof in case ice, wind, or snow knocks them down.
- Protect your pipes from cracking by detaching garden hoses before freezing weather begins. Leave your faucet dripping and open the cabinet doors under your sinks.
- Evaluate the insulation in your home. If you're a renter and can't do much to your space, there are affordable options like sealing gaps around windows with plastic or weather stripping, getting heavy curtains, and installing door sweeps or putting towels along the bottom of doors. If you're a homeowner, [you can do more permanent things](#) like insulating floors, ducts, and attics, or caulking around windows and doors.

The list below contains tips from several sources, including FEMA and the [American Lung Association](#), on protecting your home during heat waves.

- An affordable way to block sunlight from your windows is with blackout curtains or blinds. If you can install awnings or shutters, that can also help.
- If you're a homeowner, you can invest in more energy-efficient appliances or install cool roofing.
- Don't use heat-producing appliances on hot days. Dry your clothes outside instead of in the dryer, and microwave food to reduce oven use.
- Make sure your air filters are changed every six months, or even more frequently, to ensure your air conditioning works properly.
- Get some desk fans and box fans to circulate air.

READ MORE: [How disaster response and recovery work](#)

This is part of the [Disaster 101 toolkit](#), Grist's comprehensive guide to extreme weather preparation, response, and recovery.

[GRIST.ORG](#) | [Republish our stories](#)