



**EMERGENCY**  
**PREPAREDNESS**

# Communicating in First Hours

Once the shock of an emergency wears off and you take time to assess the situation, the first thing you will likely think of is reaching out to loved ones.

Communication within the first hours of a post-emergency situation are crucial to community members, business owners and government officials alike.

You will want to track down to family members and friends to make sure they are safe. Business owners will feel the responsibility to reach out to customers and the family members of employees. The same goes for school administrators, who will be compelled to alert parents and guardians about their children's safety.

Regulators and safety officials will also need to be contacted to make sure an area is secure.

As you can see, the communications tree is extensive when it comes to making sure people have the information they need to respond to the situation at hand.

Communication can be extremely challenging without properly working satellite signals, phone lines or electricity. There are some steps you can take, however, to make sure you're able to get in touch with those you love.

## BE PREPARED

How many contact numbers in your phone do you have memorized? Five? Three? One? The convenience of our smart-



© FOTOLIA

phones dialing calls for us means we have gotten away from remembering specific numbers. Could you recite the numbers of more than a couple of your friends? How about your employer?

You may be forced to use someone else's phone in an emergency. Prepare yourself by making a physical list now of the most critical contacts in

your phone. Keep the list in your purse or in a safe place in your home.

You never know when you'll need it, and when the time comes, you'll be happy you made the list.

## THE COMMUNITY

Members of the community are crucial in making sure that

communications are shared throughout the population. By staying calm in the face of an emergency and paying attention to specific orders from authorities, you can help cut down on unnecessary injuries or damage to property.

If you see that a message has been announced by a local emergency management agency or police office, do your best

to share it with your friends or family members. Newspapers are a great source of such information, so be sure to follow your local paper on social media or check its homepage if a disaster takes place.

If you are a government official, member of the media or a business owner, check out [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) for specific tips on handling emergencies.

# A Powerful Tool

**G**overnment officials and emergency personnel conduct risk assessments to guide their actions in high-stress environments. You should do the same.

A risk assessment is a process that helps identify potential hazards and analyze what could happen if that hazard takes place. In an emergency situation, there are many hazards that could occur. Knowing how to plan for them takes an understanding of how aspects of your daily life could be impacted.

## ASSESS YOUR HOME

There is no sophisticated spreadsheet or complex formula that goes into performing a quality risk assessment. You simply need a pencil, paper and knowledge of your surroundings. When performing an assessment of your home, here's what you should look for:

- **Potential Injuries:** Harm to you and your family should be the biggest concern when assessing risk factors around your home. Do you have a planned escape route in case of a fire? Are your children educated on how to call 911 if you are unable to reach out for immediate medical attention?

- **Structural Readiness:** Maybe your windows aren't ready for the battering of a hurricane. Maybe you and your family could benefit from the addition of a storm shelter to protect you from tornadoes. Whatever the weakness in your home, it is important to shore it up now instead of waiting until after the emergency.

## YOUR BUSINESS

- **Employees and Customers:** Again, the importance of protecting human life cannot be understated. Any hazards that could cause significant injuries to your employees or customers should be addressed immediately.

- **IT Infrastructure:** Depending on your business, your information technology infrastructure may be one of the most costly aspects to fix if it becomes damaged in an emergency. That's because you likely depend on it to process payroll and maintain sensitive information. You may require the guidance of an IT professional when assessing and safeguarding your electronic information.

## ASSESS YOUR PLAN

So you have an idea of what your home or business could incur in the face of an emergency situation. Now what?

A risk assessment is the perfect tool on which to build your plan. Maybe your business's fire sprinkler system hasn't been properly maintained, posing a risk if a fire took place.

Your first step should be bringing in a professional contractor to identify and execute corrective action. Once completed, your risk will be mitigated.



# Fire Safety

**E**ach year more than 2,500 people die and 12,600 are injured in home fires in the United States, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.

Direct property loss due to home fires totals about \$7.3 billion annually, the Administration said.

Fires are emergency situations that require fast action and careful planning to survive. In only a couple of minutes, fire can spread so rapidly that it becomes a threat to your life. The fact that many house fires occur at night when families are sleeping makes it even more paramount that you have a plan in place to safely make it out of your home.

## THE CAUSES

Common causes of fires — especially at night — are carelessly discarded cigarettes, sparks from fireplaces and heating appliances left dangerously close to furniture.

The U.S. Fire Administration urges extra care be paid to the kitchen, which is the room where house fires most commonly begin. Burns from cooking are the leading cause of injuries from fire.

## THE REAL DANGER

When you think of a fire, your brain may paint the picture of orange flames rapidly eating away at the structure trying to contain it. In reality, the heat and smoke



© FOTOLIA

from fire can be even more dangerous than the flames themselves.

Asphyxiation is the leading cause of fire deaths, exceeding burns by a three-to-one ratio, according to the U.S. Fire Administration. Inhaling the hot air from a fire can sear your lungs, and the poisonous gases can make you disoriented and drowsy.

## TIPS

One of the true danger zones of a home in terms of fires can be the fireplace. While handy in the cold winter months, a fireplace poses a serious threat to the safety of you and your home. Luckily, with some proper maintenance and usage techniques, you can use the

fireplace as a safe, effective source of heat.

Here are some tips from the U.S. Fire Administration when it comes to protecting yourself from fireplace dangers.

- Inspect and clean wood stove pipes and chimneys annually;
- Check monthly for damage or obstructions;

- Never burn trash, paper or green wood in a fireplace;

- Use a fireplace screen heavy enough to stop rolling logs and big enough to cover the entire opening of the fireplace to catch flying sparks; and

- Make sure the fire is completely out before leaving the house or going to bed.

# Biological Threats

**S**ome of the most dangerous emergency situations are the ones you cannot see. A biological attack is the deliberate release of germs or other substances that can do serious harm to your body.

The three basic groups of biological agents that would likely be used as weapons are bacteria, viruses and toxins, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

These agents can kill or seriously injure people and animals, and can wreak havoc on cropland. Some of the most dangerous biological agents are hard to grow and maintain, as they deteriorate quickly when exposed to environmental factors.

## THE THREAT

Unlike a storm, wildfire or explosion, a biological attack may or may not be immediately obvious to the naked eye. The DHS reports that a widespread attack could be announced by healthcare workers reporting patterns of unusual illness or waves of sick people requiring medical attention.

The inability to see the effects of a biological attack until health factors begin to present themselves makes it difficult to be prepared. Pay close attention to reports from newspapers and other media to understand the symptoms and dangers, if a biological attack takes place.

## PREVENTION TIPS

The Department of



© FOTOLIA

Homeland Security urges the following actions to protect yourself, your family and your property from the effects of a biological threat:

- **Install a Filter:** Consider installing a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter in your

furnace return duct. This will filter out most biological agents that may enter your house. If you do not have a central heating or cooling system, you can use a stand-alone portable HEPA filter.

- **Build a Kit:** Your emergency

kit should include items such as non-perishable food, water, flashlights and a battery-powered radio, as well as extra batteries.

- **Make a Plan:** Your family may be separated when a biological disaster takes place.

Have a plan in place for communication and reunification. Have a place to meet, a number to call and an up-to-date understanding of plans your community has in place for biological attacks in case you are separated from your family.

# Superstorm Sandy

**W**hen Superstorm Sandy barreled up the east coast in October and November 2012, it left behind an expanse of disastrous destruction.

Now more than two years later, experts have begun to uncover details of the emergency response in an effort to more aptly prepare communities for future similar disaster situations.

One study, conducted by the Office of the Inspector General, surveyed 174 Medicare-certified hospitals located in declared disaster areas in Connecticut, New Jersey and New York. Its Hospital Emergency Preparedness and Response report sheds new light on what can be changed before, during and after a storm to minimize loss of life.

If you are an employee at a local emergency agency, you may be able to use the report to come away with some ideas for how your town can better prepare itself for an emergency situation. Even if you live in an area more prone to tornadoes or wildfires rather than hurricanes, there are specific lessons that can be gleaned from analyzing the Superstorm Sandy preparation and response.



© FOTOLIA

## STUDY DETAILS

The Inspector General's study included site visits to 10 purposively selected hospitals located in areas most affected by the storm, as well as an

examination of information from state survey agency and accreditation organization.

These agencies surveyed hospitals prior to the storm and spoke to surveyors about

their survey process related to emergency preparedness. State hospital associations and healthcare coalitions across three states also were interviewed.

## STUDY FINDINGS

Here are some of the more interesting findings by the Inspector General:

- Most hospitals in declared

disaster areas sheltered in place during Sandy, while 7 percent were forced to evacuate;

- Eighty-nine percent of hospitals in these areas reported experiencing substantial response challenges; and

- The most commonly reported challenges included electrical and communication failures and community collaboration issues over fuel, transportation, hospital beds and public shelters.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The Inspector General laid out a list of recommendations for helping bridge the many emergency response gaps revealed by Sandy.

To improve community collaboration, the agency has urged the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response to bolster its promotion efforts in strengthening the bond between federal, state and community organizations.

Additionally, the Inspector General recommended that the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services examine its existing policies to provide flexibility for reimbursement under disaster conditions. Both the ASPR and CMS concurred with the suggestions.

# Using Your Smartphone

If your phone has web and text capabilities, it could be one of the most important tools in your arsenal of emergency preparedness items.

## BE ALERT

One of the most helpful emergency preparation tools on a smartphone is its ability to receive alerts from national and local agencies. You can sign up to receive emergency alerts that let you know when there is a threatening event forecasted, such as tornado, flooding or wildfire.

You can sign up to receive these alerts through email, voice or text messages. Start by searching online for your local emergency management office. Oftentimes the agency website will have a link to sign up for alerts.

The Red Cross and the Federal Emergency Management Agency have free applications available through your smartphone's app store.

Also, Wireless Emergency Alerts are free messages sent to cell phones within range of potentially dangerous situations and are automatically set to alert you if you have a WEA-capable phone. Check with your wireless provider to see if it participates in the program.

## STAY CONNECTED

There are many ways you can stay connected with your friends and family members during an emergency, even if



© FOTOLIA

you are unable to make a call. You can text them to let them know where you are and if you need help sent.

You also may be able to update your social media platforms to let your connec-

tions know your health status. The American Red Cross' website offers a Safe and Well link that lets you sign up for or search through a database of names reported to the platform.

Local emergency management groups, public health departments and media organizations may Tweet or post about emergency situations while they are happening. Stay up to date on informa-

tion, but remember to limit playing or streaming video during any blackout situation. Your battery life is a precious commodity in a situation, and you must conserve it, if possible.

# Prepare Your Vehicle

**W**hen you're readying for an emergency, it's important to include your vehicle in your master plan.

You'll want to make sure your vehicle is not only in good working order, but also loaded with all of the items that are essential for making it through a potentially dangerous situation.

Experts urge you to prepare to be on your own for at least 24 hours when emergency strikes. This means your kit should include safely stored food and water, as well as blankets, flashlights, batteries and hygiene items. (See our full list below.)

Remember to write a date on your food and water. Food that is badly expired could make you sick, worsening an already stressful situation. Also keep all food items stored in airtight bags inside your kit and replace them every six months or so.

## ON THE ROAD

You may be forced out of your home during an emergency. Once your vehicle is packed with the proper survival gear, be sure to continuously maintain your engine and other working parts. The last thing you want to happen if you're forced to hit the open road is a breakdown.

Be sure your fuel tank is full before you leave for a long distance. An emergency situation can shut down gas stations and other businesses.



© FOTOLIA

Disasters such as tornadoes or hurricanes are oftentimes predicted by your local newspaper or weather channels. Heed expert advice, and prepare your vehicle with plenty of time to spare.

Other tips for driving before, during or after an emergency situation:

- Don't try to out-drive the conditions in emergencies

such as tornadoes or hurricanes. Have a plan of where you'd like to be when the storm comes through, and stay put. Also be careful after a big storm, as power lines or trees may be down, posing a threat to drive-ability.

- Leave yourself plenty of time to stop and rest, especially if you're on a long drive.
- Brake carefully in adverse

weather. It takes more time to fully stop your vehicle in slick or icy conditions.

## SUPPLIES

- Tool box with hammer, screwdrivers and wrenches
- Jumper cables and a tow chain
- Road flare
- Battery-operated radio

• Extra batteries for radio and other items

- Flashlight
- Phone charger
- Cash and change
- Plastic storage bags
- Supply of vital medications
- Extra clothing and work gloves
- Rain gear
- First aid kit