

Disaster Preparedness for People with Disabilities

Tips For People With Disabilities and Medical Concerns

Establish a Personal Support Network

A personal support network can consist of friends, roommates, family members, relatives, personal attendants, co-workers and neighbors who will check in with you in an emergency to ensure you are OK and provide assistance if needed. Do not depend on any one person. Identify a minimum of three people at each location where you regularly spend your time: job, home, school, volunteer site, etc.

Personal assistance services (attendants) may not be available after a major disaster. Therefore, it is vital that your support network consist of people other than your attendants. If you employ one or use the services of a home health agency or other type of in-home service, work with them to develop an emergency plan. How will you get along for as long as seven days?

In spite of your best planning, sometimes a personal support network must be created on the spot. For example, you may find yourself in a shelter and in need of immediate assistance. Think about what you require, how you want things done and what kind of person you would select.

Seven Important Items to Discuss, Exchange and Practice with Your Personal Support Network

- Make arrangements for your support network to immediately check on you after a disaster and, if needed, offer assistance.
- Exchange important keys.
- Show them where you keep emergency supplies.
- Share copies of your emergency documents, evacuation plans and emergency health information card.
- Agree upon and practice a communications system (how to contact each other in an emergency). Do not count on the telephones working.
- You and your personal support network should always notify each other when you are going out of town and when you will return.
- The relationship should be mutual. Learn about each other's needs and how to help each other in an emergency.

Traveling

When staying in hotels, motels, etc., identify yourself to registration desk staff as a person who will need assistance in an emergency and state the type of assistance you may need.

Health Card

- An emergency health information card communicates to rescuers what they need to know about you if they find you unconscious or incoherent, or if they need to quickly help evacuate you.
- An emergency health information card contains information about your medications, adaptive equipment, blood type, allergies and sensitivities, insurance numbers, social security number, immunization dates, communication difficulties and preferred treatment, as well as contact information for your health providers, personal support network and emergency contacts.
- Make multiple copies of this card to keep in emergency supply kits, car, work, wallet (behind your driver's license or primary identification card), wheelchair pack, etc.
- Update this information every six months.

Emergency Contact List

It is often easier to place an out-of-state call from a disaster area than to call within it. Ask relatives or friends who live outside your immediate area (approximately 100 miles away) to act as a clearing house for information about you and your family after a disaster. All family members should know to call the contact person to report their location and condition. The contact person should then relay messages to your other friends and relatives outside the disaster area. This will help to reduce calling into and out of the affected area once the phones are working.

Besides emergency out-of-town contacts, your list should include your personal support network, equipment vendors, doctors, utility companies, employers, schools and day care centers.

Emergency Documents

This includes important information typically needed after a disaster. Store emergency documents [such as your health card, family records (birth, marriage and death certificates), wills, deeds, family social security numbers, charge and bank accounts, insurance documentation, etc.] in sealed freezer bags in all of your emergency supply kits. If you feel comfortable doing so, give copies to your out-of-state contacts and the people in your personal support network. Remember to place copies in a safe-deposit box. Be sure to update this information every six months as needed.

Conduct an Ability Self-Assessment

Evaluate your capabilities, limitations and needs, as well as your surroundings to determine what type of help you will need in an emergency.

1. Will you be able to independently shut off the necessary utilities (gas, water, electricity)?
 - Do you know where shut-off valves are? Can you get to them?
 - Can you find and use the right wrench to turn those handles?
2. Can you operate a fire extinguisher?
 - Have you practiced?
 - Will extended handles make these items usable for you?
3. Will you be able to carry your evacuation kit?
 - What do you need to do in order to carry it? How much can you carry? Do you have duplicates at other locations?
4. Have you moved or secured large objects that might block your escape path?
5. Write instructions for the following (keep a copy with you and share a copy with your personal support network):
 - How to turn off utilities (color-code or label them for quick identification).
 - Main gas valve, located next to the meter - blue; Electrical power circuit breaker box - red; Main water valve - green.
 - If you have a reduced or limited sense of smell, alert your personal support network to check for gas leaks.
 - How to operate and safely move your essential equipment. Consider attaching simple instructions to your equipment.
 - How to safely transport you if you need to be carried, and include any areas of vulnerability.
 - How to provide personal assistance services.
 - Remind anyone who assists you to practice strict cleanliness. With limited water and increased health hazards, the possibility of infection increases. Keep a supply of latex gloves in your emergency supply kit and ask people assisting you with personal hygiene to use them.
 - List all personal care assistance needs (dressing, bathing, etc.) with instructions on how best to assist you.
 - Make a map of where to find medications, aids and supplies, and share it with your personal support network.
 - How to evacuate. As much as possible, clear obstacles from aisles and secure large, heavy items such as bookcases that may fall and block your path. Plan alternate exit paths.

Communication: Practice Assertiveness Skills

Take charge and practice how to quickly explain to people how to move your mobility aids or how to move you safely and rapidly. Be prepared to give clear, specific and concise instructions and directions to rescue personnel: "Take my oxygen tank," "Take my wheelchair," "Take my gamma globulin from the freezer," "Take my communication device from under the bed."

Practice giving these instructions with the least amount of words in the least amount of time. For example, the traditional "fire fighter's carry" may be hazardous for some people with respiratory weakness. You need to be able to give brief instructions regarding how to move you.

Be prepared to request an accommodation from disaster personnel. For example, if you are unable to wait in long lines for such items as water, food and disaster relief applications, practice clearly and concisely explaining why you cannot wait.

"Carry-With-You" Supplies to Keep with You at All Times

Packing/Container suggestions: a fanny pack, back pack or drawstring bag which can be hung from a wheelchair, scooter or other assistive device.

- Emergency Health Information Card.
- Instructions on personal assistance needs and how best to provide them.
- Copy of Emergency Documents.
- Essential medications/copies of prescriptions (at least a week's supply).
- Flashlight on key ring.
- Signaling device (whistle, beeper, bell, screecher).
- Small battery-operated radio and extra batteries.

Disability-Related Supplies to Add to Regular Emergency Kits

Plan for enough disability-related supplies to last for up to two weeks (medication syringes, colostomy supplies, respiratory aids, catheters, padding, distilled water, etc.). If you have chemical sensitivities or a respiratory or cardiac condition, store towels, masks, industrial respirators or other supplies you can use to filter your air supply. Do not expect shelters or first aid stations to meet your supply needs. In an emergency, supplies will be limited.

Store supplies in areas you anticipate will be easy to reach after a disaster. If you are unable to afford extras, consider contacting disability-specific organizations, such as the Multiple Sclerosis Society, Arthritis Foundation, United Cerebral Palsy Association, etc. They may be able to assist you in gathering low-cost or no-cost emergency supplies and medications.

Medication

It is best to maintain at least a seven-to-14-day supply of essential medications (heart, blood pressure, birth control, diabetic, psychiatric orphan drugs, etc.) and keep it with you at all times. If this is not possible, even a three-day supply would be extremely helpful.

Work with your doctor(s) to obtain an extra supply of medications. Make several copies of your prescriptions and place one in each of your survival kits as well as your car kit and wallet.

Ask your provider or pharmacist how to store your medication. Ask how often you should rotate stored supplies to ensure the effectiveness does not weaken. If you are on medications that are administered by a clinic or hospital (such as methadone, chemo or radiation therapy) ask your provider how you should plan for a 3-14 day disruption.

If you are a smoker, be aware that smoking is not allowed in shelters. If getting to an outside smoking area may be difficult for you, consider stocking your evacuation kit with nicotine gum or patches.

Life in cramped, unheated shelters can increase the chances of pneumonia, influenza and colds. Stock your kits with vitamins or medications to guard against getting sick and to cope with being sick.

Equipment and Assistive Devices

Keep important equipment and assistive devices in a consistent, convenient and secured place, so you can quickly and easily locate them. Make sure such items as false teeth, hearing aids, prosthesis, mobility aids, canes, crutches, walkers, respirators, service animal harnesses, augmentative communication devices or electronic communicators, artificial larynx, wheelchair, sanitary aids, batteries, eye glasses, contacts and cleaning solutions, etc., are secured. For example, keep these items in a container attached to your night stand or bed post, secure your oxygen tank to the wall, keep your wheelchair locked and close to bed, etc. This helps prevent them from falling, flying or rolling away during a quake and makes them easily accessible in the event of an evacuation.

If you use a laptop computer as a means of communication, consider purchasing a power converter. A power converter allows most laptops to run from a cigarette lighter on the dashboard of a vehicle.

Checklist

Print out a copy of this list for your convenience and be sure to write down the completion date for each activity at it is accomplished.

- _____ Establish a personal support network.
- _____ Make an emergency health information card.
- _____ Make an emergency contact list.
- _____ Collect copies of your emergency documents.
- _____ Store copies of your health card, contact list and emergency documents in your wallet, purse, supply kits and safe deposit box. Give copies to members of your personal support network as well as your out-of-area contact.
- _____ Conduct an ability self-assessment.
- _____ Collect "carry-with-you supplies" at all times.
- _____ Compile disability-related supplies for emergency kits.
- _____ Maintain a seven day supply of essential medications.
- _____ Keep important equipment and assistive devices in consistent, convenient and secured places.
- _____ Write out instructions for items you will need help with in an emergency.

Excerpted from:

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(<http://www.ilrcsf.org/resources/publications.shtml>)