Every year, thousands of people are impacted by severe weather threats such as tornadoes and severe thunderstorms.

Every state in the U.S. has experienced tornadoes and severe weather, and although some more than others, everyone is at risk. You can take steps to prepare for when severe weather strikes in your area. Knowing the most common weather hazards in your area, your vulnerability, and what actions you should take can save your life and others.

_Note—_The information in this guide is intended as a guideline only. Always follow any specific instructions provided by local authorities.

**Before Severe Weather**

The following are things you can do to protect yourself, your family and your property before severe weather:

- Build an emergency supply kit, which includes items like non-perishable food, water, a battery-powered or hand-crank radio, extra flashlights and batteries. You may want to prepare a portable kit and keep it in your car in case you are told to evacuate. This kit should also include a pair of goggles and disposable breathing masks for each member of the family. The *Emergency Preparedness* guide provides information on creating an emergency kit.

- Make a family emergency plan. Your family may not be together when disaster strikes, so it is important to know how you will get back together and what you will do in case of an emergency. The *Emergency Preparedness* guide provides information on creating a family emergency plan.

- Plan for pet safety. The *Preparing Your Pets for Emergencies* guide provides information on emergency planning for pets. If you must evacuate, take your pets with you if possible. However, if you are going to a public shelter, it is important to understand that animals may not be allowed inside. Plan in advance for shelter alternatives that will work for both you and your pets.

- Make a back-up emergency plan in case you can't care for your animals yourself. Develop a buddy system with neighbors, friends and relatives to make sure that someone is available to care for or evacuate your pets if you are unable to do so. Be prepared to improvise and use what you have on hand to make it on your own for at least three days, maybe longer.

- Continually monitor the media—Be aware of storm's which could impact your area.

- Know how you will be warned in an emergency (NOAA Weather radios with a tone alert are a good option).

- Know if you live or work in a flood prone area. Check with your local emergency management for details.

- Know where to shelter (e.g., basement, interior room/hall, bathroom, closet, etc) if conditions warrant and where shelters in your area are located.
• Ensure your home is ready—Elevate items in the basement which could be flooded. Bring in outdoors items such as children's toys, patio furniture, garbage cans, etc which could be blown around and damaged. Remove dead or rotting trees and branches that could fall and cause injury or damage.

• Know how to shut off utilities, including power, water and gas, to your home. Have proper tools (e.g., wrench) ready and nearby.

• Find out what types of events and kinds of damages are covered by your insurance policy. Keep insurance policies, important documents and other valuables in a safe and secure location.

• Keep fire extinguishers on hand and make sure everyone knows how to use them.

Note—If you are elderly or disabled and live alone, have someone help you with these tasks.

For additional information on preparing for and coping with emergencies, refer to other guides in the educational library.

Know the Terms Used to Describe Severe Weather

• Tornado Watch—Tornadoes are possible. Remain alert for approaching storms. Watch the sky and stay tuned to NOAA Weather Radio, commercial radio or television for information.

• Tornado Warning—A tornado has been sighted or indicated by weather radar. Take shelter immediately.

• Severe Thunderstorm Watch—Tells you when and where severe thunderstorms are likely to occur. Watch the sky and stay tuned to NOAA Weather Radio, commercial radio or television for information.

• Severe Thunderstorm Warning—Issued when severe weather has been reported by spotters or indicated by radar. Warnings indicate imminent danger to life and property to those in the path of the storm.

• Flood Watch—Flooding is possible. Tune in to NOAA Weather Radio, commercial radio or television for information.

• Flash Flood Watch—Flash flooding is possible. Be prepared to move to higher ground; listen to NOAA Weather Radio, commercial radio or television for information.

• Flood Warning—Flooding is occurring or will occur soon; if advised to evacuate, do so immediately.

• Flash Flood Warning—A flash flood is occurring; seek higher ground on foot immediately.

During Severe Weather

The following are things you can do to protect yourself, your family and your property during severe weather:

• Keep an eye on the sky. Look for darkening skies, flashes of light or increasing wind. Listen for the sound of thunder. If you can hear thunder, you are close enough to be struck by lightning.

• Blowing debris or the sound of an approaching tornado may alert you. Tornado danger signs included dark, almost greenish sky; large hail; a large, dark, low-lying cloud or a load roar, similar to a freight train.

• Heed shelter or evacuation requests made by officials or announcements on radio/television.

• Gather family members, bring pets indoors and have your emergency supply kit ready.
• Close outside doors and window blinds, shades or curtains. Stay away from doors, windows and exterior walls. Stay in the shelter location until the danger has passed.

• During lightning, do not use wired telephones, touch electrical appliances or use running water. Cordless or cellular telephones are safe to use.

• Remember the 30/30 Lightning Safety Rule: Go indoors if, after seeing lightning, you cannot count to 30 before hearing thunder. Stay indoors for 30 minutes after hearing the last clap of thunder.

• If it has been raining hard for several hours, or steadily raining for several days, be alert to the possibility of a flood.

• Do not walk through flowing water. Drowning is the number one cause of flood deaths. Six inches of swiftly moving water can knock you off your feet.

• Stay indoors and limit travel to only absolutely necessary trips. Listen to radio/television for updates.

**Auto Safety Steps**

Plan long trips carefully, listening to the radio or television for the latest weather forecasts and road conditions. If bad weather is forecast, drive only if absolutely necessary.

• Keep your gas tank full in case evacuation is needed. Keep your vehicle maintained and in good working order.

• Assemble an emergency car kit including: flashlight with extra batteries, basic first-aid kit, necessary medications, pocket knife, booster cables, blanket/sleeping bag, extra clothes (including rain gear, gloves and socks), non-perishable foods, non-electric can opener, basic tool kit (pliers, wrench, screwdriver), tow rope, container of water and a brightly colored cloth to serve as a flag.

• Do not drive through a flooded area. Six inches of water can cause a vehicle to lose control and possibly stall. A foot of water will float many vehicles. Cars, SUVs and pickup trucks can be swept away in just two feet of moving water. Do not drive around road barriers—they are there for a reason.

• Be aware of areas where floodwaters have receded. Roads may have weakened and could collapse under the weight of a car.

**After Severe Weather**

• Stay off roads to allow emergency crews to clear roads and provide emergency assistance.

• Help injured or trapped persons. Do not attempt to move seriously injured persons unless they are in immediate danger of death or further injury.

• Use the telephone only for emergencies.

• Use care around downed power lines. Assume a downed wire is a live wire. Report to emergency authorities.

• Watch out for overhead hazards such as broken tree limbs, wires and other debris. Be cautious walking around.

• Be aware of children playing outdoors and in the streets, particularly climbing on or running around downed trees and wires. Parents should remind their children to stay away from these hazards.

• Avoid walking into flood waters. The water may be contaminated by oil, gasoline or raw sewerage, contain downed power lines or animals.

• Look for hazards such as broken/leaking gas lines, damaged sewage systems, flooded electrical circuits, submerged appliances and structural damage. Leave the area if you smell gas or chemical fumes.
• Clean everything that gets wet. For food, medicines and cosmetics; when in doubt, throw it out.
• Make sure backup generators are well ventilated. Never use grills, generators or camping stoves indoors.
• Listen to media reports and/or local authorities about whether your community water supply is safe to drink and other instructions.
• Make sure gutters and drains are clear for future rain/flood events.
• Take photographs/videos of damage as soon as possible. Contact your insurance company to file a claim.

Additional Tips/Precautions for Seniors and People With Disabilities

If you are elderly or disabled, you may need to take additional precautions. If you live alone, seek help from trusted neighbors, community members or professionals (police, health care workers, etc.) If you live in an assisted living facility or retirement community, listen to directions from directors of the facility and speak up about your needs. Plus, consider the following:
• Plan emergency procedures with trusted friends, home health care agencies or workers. Make sure at least one of them has a key to your home.
• Find out about emergency shelters set up in the area; often shelters are set up exclusively for people with special needs.
• Contact your city or county government’s emergency information management office. Many local offices keep lists of people with disabilities so they can be located quickly in a sudden emergency.
• Plan how you will evacuate or signal for help.

• Tell others where you keep your emergency supplies.
• Teach others how to operate necessary equipment.
• Label equipment like wheelchairs, canes or walkers. Plus, know the size and weight of your wheelchair, in addition to whether or not it is collapsible.
• Wear medical alert tags or bracelets to help identify your disability.
• If you are dependent on dialysis or other life sustaining treatment, know the location and availability of more than one facility.

Disaster Relief

In the aftermath of severe weather, there will probably be many pressing issues to take care of, but it is essential that your first priority be your own safety—and that of your loved ones. If you are in need of emergency services (shelter, clothing, food, money, etc.), contact one of the emergency resources listed in the “Emergency Resources” section at the end of this guide. In addition, safeguard yourself and your loved ones by taking the following tips into consideration:
• Check radio, television or online resources for information on shelters, helpful resources and safety advisories.
• Stay out of and away from damaged buildings. If you had to evacuate, return home only when authorities say it is safe.
• If you have children or grandchildren with you, make sure they are constantly supervised.
• Be alert for potential hazards. Take extreme care when moving in an area damaged by storms.
• Cooperate with authorities. Whether you’re asked to keep off emergency roads or given other directions, do your best to comply.
• If you are elderly or disabled and need assistance with transportation, contact your city or county government’s emergency information management office.

Caring for Yourself
Disasters can result in extreme emotions including stress, helplessness, fear, irritability, anger and depression. You may also suffer from nightmares, shock, loss of appetite and the inability to concentrate. All of these reactions and feelings are normal; but if you do not address them, you can jeopardize your health. If you or a loved one are unable to cope, do not hesitate to get help. Many temporary shelters offer free counseling services to victims, or referrals to professionals who can provide further assistance.

In addition, consider the following tips:
• Have realistic expectations and goals, and be patient with yourself.
• Reach out to supportive friends and family for comfort and guidance.
• Give yourself plenty of time to recover and rest.
• Try to maintain a nutritious diet to keep your energy up.
• Focus on your breathing—deep, slow breaths will help calm you.
• Join a support group. You can find support groups through your medical provider, online or through local Red Cross chapters.
• If you work, ask your employer if it offers an EAP (Employee Assistance Program). An EAP counselor can provide counseling on a wide range of issues, including stress, anxiety, dealing with a tragedy and more.

If you are elderly or have special needs, you may require additional help and coping skills. Rely on trusted friends or neighbors for support or seek help from health care workers, professionals or city management emergency workers. Also, check the “Emergency Resources” section at the end of this guide for more resources.

Helping Children Cope
Natural disasters are stressful for everyone, but children may need extra help coping. A child’s reaction will vary depending on his or her personality and age. Infants may become more irritable or fearful. Toddlers and preschoolers will probably feel frightened, insecure or helpless, and may display regressive behavior such as clingingness or separation anxiety. School-aged children may become preoccupied or fearful and experience stress-related physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches. Preteens and teenagers may feel invincible; display reckless behavior; withdraw; or become hostile. Since children do not have the same coping skills as adults, they will need your love, support, guidance and reassurance.

The following tips may help you help children affected by a severe weather:
• Answer any questions with simple, honest, accurate answers. If you don’t know the answer, say you will try to find out.
• Talk about your own fears and stresses so children understand, but do not unnecessarily scare them with too many details.
• Don’t make false promises; instead, set realistic goals.
• Make time for children and pay extra attention to their needs.
• If you are in a shelter, reassure children that your situation is temporary.
• Encourage your children to play (in safe areas).
• Maintain regular routines if at all possible. For example, even in a shelter, you can still have a bedtime routine such as reading or story-telling before children go to sleep.

What to Do if Your Home Is Damaged or Destroyed
If there is a disaster declaration, a disaster resource contacts are usually made available to provide information about public, private and voluntary resources to help you recover from severe weather.

When assessing the damage to your home, use extreme caution. Watch for hidden dangers: flooded areas, falling structures, sharp metal, fires and other potential hazards.

The following tips may help:
• If you smell gas or hear a blowing or hissing noise, you may have a gas leak. In this case, open a window and quickly leave. Turn off the gas at the outside main valve, if possible, and contact the gas company from a safe location. Note: If you turn off the gas, it must be turned back on by a professional.
• Clean up spilled medicines, bleaches, gasoline or other flammable liquids immediately.
• If you see sparks or broken or frayed wires, or if you smell hot insulation, call an electrician. You may need to turn off the electricity at the main fuse box or circuit breaker; however, if there is a lot of water on the ground, this may be hazardous, so have an electrician do it for you.
• If you suspect sewage lines are damaged, avoid using toilets and call a plumber. If water pipes are damaged, contact the water company and avoid using water from the tap.
• Consider hiring a reliable contractor—but beware of frauds who prey on disaster victims. Your best bet is to get a reference from friends, neighbors or co-workers who have had improvement work done. Get written estimates from several firms. Ask for explanations for price variations. Don’t automatically choose the lowest bidder. Be sure to get a signed contract from any contractor you agree to work with.
• If you live in an assisted living facility or retirement facility, the director should advise you of any damage and what steps, if any, you will need to take.

Home Owner’s and Renter’s Insurance
• If you have insurance, make a detailed list of the damages and contact your insurance representative as soon as possible. If you aren’t able to call from home, tell your agent where you can be reached—and try to be patient. Where there is extensive and widespread damage, insurance representatives usually handle claims on an as-needed basis, beginning with the most serious situations.
• Property insurance typically protects against the financial loss due to damages incurred to real and/or personal property, but policies vary, and many have exclusions. For example, many policies do not cover damage caused by flooding, unless you have purchased additional flood coverage. Therefore, read your policy carefully and contact your agent with specific questions about coverage or the claims process.
Emergency Resources

Numerous shelters are typically set up in the event of a natural disaster. To find the shelter nearest you, check local radio, television or online resources, contact your local Red Cross chapter or emergency management service, or one of the resources below. In addition, some of these organizations may be able to provide temporary housing or financial aid to families who have lost their homes.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
800-621-FEMA (800-621-3362)
www.fema.gov

Red Cross Hotline
800-REDCROSS (800-733-2767)
www.redcross.org

The Salvation Army
703-684-5500
www.salvationarmyusa.org

Note—For those who would like to help, these organizations are always seeking volunteers and donations (food, clothing, baby formula and diapers -- and financial aid). As needs vary by location and continually change in the days following natural disasters, it is best to call these agencies for a list of specific needs before you make a donation or to see how volunteers are needed.