Emergency Preparedness for Caregivers

Planning ahead for emergencies is important for everyone but it is absolutely critical for caregivers. Being a caregiver can be challenging. Dealing with a disaster in addition to caregiving responsibilities can quickly become overwhelming, with devastating consequences. It is essential for caregivers to identify potential challenges and take the steps necessary so they and their loved ones are prepared. Knowing what to do in an emergency and being prepared is the single best defense against disaster for you and your loved one.

This guide can help caregivers learn how to protect their loved ones by planning ahead. Many of the tips in this guide have been adapted from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Discuss these ideas with your loved one and prepare an emergency plan. Adapt this information to your personal circumstances and make every effort to follow instructions received from authorities on the scene.

Learn About Potential Disasters

Learn about potential disasters that could occur in your loved one’s area and the emergency notification systems in place. Begin by calling the local Emergency Management Office or Red Cross chapter and asking the following questions:

- Which disasters could occur in my loved one’s area?
- How should I prepare for each disaster?
- How will my loved one be warned of an emergency?
- What are the evacuation routes for my loved one’s community?
- Is special assistance available for elderly or disabled persons?
- Learn about emergency plans for adult day care centers, senior centers, residential care facilities, etc. If your loved one lives in an assisted living facility or retirement home, ask the director about safety precautions and emergency and evacuation procedures.

Learn About Communication Plans

Know what systems are in place to warn of an emergency. Although disasters often happen unexpectedly, in most areas, the following warning systems are in place:

- **Commercial radio and television stations**—Many local and national radio and television networks broadcast emergency information, but check with your loved one’s local Emergency Management Office to find out the designated Emergency Alert System (EAS) stations for both radio and television.

- **National Weather Service**—The National Weather Service provides information about severe weather, such as thunderstorms, winter storms, hurricanes, floods and tornadoes.

- **NOAA weather radio**—These special radios provide the earliest notification with an alarm to alert about anticipated bad weather. NOAA radio receivers can be purchased at most retail outlets that sell electronic merchandise.

- **Door-to-door warning from local emergency officials**—If officials come to warn of potential emergencies, listen carefully and follow their instructions.
Create an Emergency Plan

The reality of a disaster situation is that your loved one may not have access to his or her usual resources. For that reason, it is critical to consider what kinds of resources your loved one uses on a daily basis and how he or she will cope if those resources are limited or unavailable.

To plan in advance, you and your loved one should think through the details of your loved one’s every day life. If there are people who assist your loved one on a daily basis, list who they are, and how they will be contacted in an emergency. Create a personal support network by identifying others who will help your loved one in an emergency. Think about what modes of transportation your loved one uses and what alternative modes could serve as back-ups. If your loved one requires handicap accessible transportation, be sure your alternatives are also accessible.

For every aspect of your loved one’s daily routine, find an alternative procedure. Make a plan and write it down. Keep a copy of your loved one’s plan in his or her emergency supply kit and a list of important information and contacts in both your and your loved one’s wallet. Share this plan with your loved one’s family, friends and others in your loved one’s personal support network. Post the plan in your loved one’s home where it can easily be found in the event of an emergency.

Consider the following tips:

- Talk to your loved one about the dangers of fire, severe weather, earthquakes and other emergencies. Make sure he or she knows how to recognize danger signals, including smoke detectors, fire alarms and local community warning systems (e.g., horns, sirens).
- Designate a substitute caregiver in case you are unavailable or unable to provide care.
- Post emergency numbers near all phones.

- In a disaster you may become separated from your loved one. In case this happens, create a written, detailed description of your loved one’s care needs and keep it current. Provide copies to members of your loved one’s personal support network.
- Label your loved one’s equipment, such as wheelchairs, canes or walkers. Plus, know the size and weight of your loved one’s wheelchair, in addition to whether or not it is collapsible.
- Have your loved one wear medical alert tags or bracelets to help identify any disabilities.
- If your loved one is dependent on dialysis or other life sustaining treatment, know the location and availability of more than one facility.
- If your loved one undergoes regular treatment at a clinic or hospital, or receives regular services such as home health care, treatment or transportation, talk to his or her service provider about their emergency plans. Work with them to identify back-up service providers within your loved one’s area and any areas he or she might evacuate to.
- If your loved one uses medical equipment in his or her home that requires electricity to operate, talk to his or her health care provider about what you can do to prepare for its use during a power outage.
- Talk to your loved one’s doctors and pharmacists about continuity of care and prescription needs in the event communication lines are down.
- Learn how to turn off the main switches for water, gas and electricity in your loved one’s home in case you need to evacuate.
- Take basic first aid and CPR classes.
Prepare a Disaster Supplies Kit

Having a disaster supplies kit can be a life-saver in an emergency, particularly if your loved one is forced to evacuate. By assembling essential supplies, you can protect your loved one and avoid waiting in lines for food, water, medicine or other critical supplies.

Assemble enough supplies to last your loved one for at least three days. Store them in an easy-to-carry container, such as a wheeled suitcase, backpack or duffel bag, with an ID tag. Be sure to include:

- A supply of water (one gallon per person per day). Store water in sealed, unbreakable containers. Identify the storage date and replace every six months.
- A supply of non-perishable packaged or canned food and a non-electric can opener.
- Easy on/off clothing, outerwear (e.g., rain jacket, cold-weather jacket, hat, gloves, etc.) and sturdy shoes.
- Incontinence products, if needed.
- At least one week’s worth of any prescription medications your loved one uses, including instructions, dosages and any allergies. If it is not possible to have a week-long supply of medicines and supplies, keep as much as possible on hand and talk to your loved one’s pharmacist or doctor about what else you should do to prepare. Replace medicines regularly, as some have expiration dates.
- Copies of all of your loved one’s prescriptions.
- Extra eyeglasses and hearing-aid batteries.
- Extra oxygen, wheelchair batteries and/or other special equipment.
- List of your loved one’s doctors and emergency contacts.
- A list of the styles and serial numbers of your loved one’s medical devices.
- Copies of your loved one’s medical insurance and Medicare cards.
- Blankets or sleeping bags.
- A battery-powered or hand crank radio and a NOAA Weather Radio with tone alert and extra batteries for both, flashlight and plenty of extra batteries.
- Special items for pets or service animals, if applicable (e.g., food and water, collar, leash, sturdy carrier, identification, license, proof of vaccination, etc.).
- A first aid kit.
- A whistle to signal for help.
- A dust mask to help filter contaminated air and plastic sheeting and duct tape to shelter-in-place.
- Moist towelettes, garbage bags and plastic ties for personal sanitation.
- A wrench or pliers to turn off utilities.
- Local maps.
- Credit cards and cash.
- An extra set of your loved one’s car keys.
- Your loved one’s insurance cards and insurance agent’s name and telephone number.
- Copies of your loved one’s important documents such as identification, family records, wills, powers of attorney, deeds, social security numbers, credit card and bank information, and tax records. Keep these documents in a water- and fire-proof container. Include the names and numbers of everyone in your loved one’s personal support network.
Create a Personal Support Network

If your loved one may need assistance during a disaster, make a list of family, friends and others who could be part of your loved one’s personal support network. If your loved one lives alone, seek help from trusted neighbors, community members or professionals (police, health care workers, etc.) If your loved one lives in an assisted living facility or retirement community, speak to the directors of the facility and speak up about your loved one’s needs.

Talk to these people and ask them to be part of your loved one’s support network. Share each aspect of your emergency plan with everyone in the group, including a friend or relative in another area who would not be impacted by the same emergency who can help if necessary. Make sure everyone knows how you plan to evacuate your loved one and where your loved one might go in case of a disaster. Make sure that someone in your loved one’s personal support network has an extra key to his or her home, knows where the emergency supplies are kept and has copies of your loved one’s medical history, medications, physician information and family contacts. Practice your plan with those who have agreed to be part of your loved one’s personal support network.

Develop a Family Communications Plan

Plan how to contact those important to your loved one and review what you will do in different situations. Consider a plan where your loved one and other members of his or her family calls, or e-mails, the same friend or relative in the event of an emergency. It may be easier to make a long-distance phone call than to call across town, so an out-of-town contact, not in the impacted area, may be in a better position to communicate among separated family members. You and your loved one may have trouble getting through, or the phone system may be down altogether, but be patient. For more information on how to develop a family communications plan visit www.ready.gov.

Deciding to Stay or Go

Depending on your loved one’s circumstances and the nature of the emergency, the first important decision is whether your loved one should stay or go. You should understand and plan for both possibilities. Use common sense and available information to determine if there is immediate danger. In any emergency, local authorities may or may not immediately be able to provide information on what is happening and what should be done. However, you and your loved one should monitor television or radio news reports for information or official instructions as they become available. If your loved one is specifically told to evacuate or seek medical treatment, he or she should do so immediately. If your loved one requires additional travel time or need transportation assistance, make these arrangements in advance.

Consider Your Loved One’s Pets

Whether your loved one decides to stay put in an emergency or evacuate to a safer location, you will need to make plans in advance for your loved one’s pets and service animals. Keep in mind that what’s best for your loved one is typically what’s best for his or her animals. If your loved one must evacuate, he or she should take his or her pets, if possible. However, if your loved one is going to a public shelter, it is important to understand that only service animals may be allowed inside. Plan in advance for shelter alternatives that will work for both your loved one and his or her pets; consider family or friends outside of your loved one’s immediate area, pet-friendly shelters and veterinarians who would be willing to take in your loved one and his or her pets in an emergency. For more information about pet preparedness, visit www.ready.gov.

Staying Put

There may be situations when it’s simply best for your loved one to stay where he or she is and avoid any uncertainty outside. Consider what you can do to help your loved one safely
shelter-in-place alone or with friends, family or neighbors. Also consider how a shelter designated for the public would meet your loved one’s needs. There could be times when your loved one will need to stay put and create a barrier between him or herself and potentially contaminated air outside. This process is known as “sealing the room.” You and your loved one should use available information to assess the situation. If there is a large amount of debris in the air, or if local authorities say the air is badly contaminated, this may be the most appropriate action. If your loved one lives independently and would not be able to manage this without assistance, you will need to arrange for someone in his or her personal support network to assist your loved one or plan for some other alternative. For more information about “sealing the room,” visit www.ready.gov.

**Evacuation**

There may be conditions in which your loved one will decide to get away, or there may be situations when he or she may be ordered to leave. Plan how your loved one will get away and anticipate where he or she will go. Choose several destinations in different directions to have options in an emergency. Ask about evacuation plans at the places where your loved one spends time including community organizations, adult day care centers, senior centers, residential or assisted living facilities and other places your loved one frequents. If your loved one typically rely on elevators, have a back-up plan in case they are not working.

**Fire Safety**

Plan two ways out of every room in your loved one’s home in case of fire. Draw a floor plan of your loved one’s home indicating escape routes and have your loved one practice using them. Check for items such as bookcases, hanging pictures, or overhead lights that could fall and block an escape path. Check hallways, stairwells, doorways, windows and other areas for hazards that may keep your loved one from safely leaving a building during an emergency. Secure or remove furniture and objects that may block your loved one’s path.

**Contact Your Local Emergency Information Management Office**

Contact the local Emergency Management Office in the community where your loved one lives to see if they offer any of the services below:

- **Registries:** Some local Emergency Management Offices maintain registers of older people and those with disabilities so they can be located and assisted quickly in a disaster.

- **Emergency Shelters:** often shelters are set up exclusively for the elderly and people with special needs.

- **Transportation:** If your loved one needs assistance with transportation in the event of evacuation.

**Additional Tips for Caregivers of Persons with Alzheimer’s**

In people with Alzheimer’s, a disaster can lead to dangerous and difficult behaviors, such as wandering, agitation, and emotional outbursts. Alzheimer’s patients can easily get separated from caregivers who understand their condition and needs. They have a limited ability to understand what is happening, and they may forget what they have been told about the disaster.

In an emergency, it is imperative that you not leave a loved one with Alzheimer’s alone, even for a second. It only takes a moment for your loved one to wander away and become lost.

If you can, inform others (authorities, shelter staff, family members, friends) that your loved one has Alzheimer’s or dementia and may not understand what is happening.
Consider the following additional suggestions for your emergency plan and disaster kit:

- Enroll your loved one in the Alzheimer’s Association’s Safe Return program, a nationwide emergency response service for individuals with Alzheimer’s (if your loved one is already enrolled, make certain his or her information is current). In addition, some police departments will keep a photo and fingerprints of people with Alzheimer’s disease on file. Check with your local police department.

- Have your loved one wear an identity tag or bracelet. Put identification labels in all of your loved one’s clothing.

- Include a recent picture of your loved one as well as a physical description (age, hair color, eye color, identifying marks) in your loved one’s disaster kit and provide copies to members of your loved one’s personal support network.

- Check with the local Alzheimer’s Association to see if help is available.

Managing Catastrophic Reactions in Alzheimer’s Patients

Unfamiliar situations or people, crowds, noise, complicated questions or orders, sudden movements and feelings of loss may trigger a catastrophic response in Alzheimer’s patients. In an emergency, it may be impossible to avoid these triggers. Reactions will vary, but may include weeping, yelling, stubbornness or performing a repetitive movement (e.g., rocking that gets progressively faster, bouncing on toes, pacing).

Consider the following techniques to help manage catastrophic reactions:

- Include comfort objects in your loved one’s disaster kit.

- Simplify tasks that may cause confusion.

- Where possible, slow down; avoid rushing.

- Stay calm and don’t panic. If you are calm, your loved one will feel more at ease too.

- Touch and hug your loved one in an attempt to calm him or her before things get out of control.

- Don’t try to rationalize or reason with your loved one.

- To the extent possible, distract your loved one using food, music or a favorite activity.

- Make eye contact and speak in low, soothing tones.
Helpful Resources

Ready.gov
Ready Campaign
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528
800-480-2520 (Publication Ordering)
www.ready.gov
ready.adcouncil.org/beprepared/fep/index.jsp
(Online Emergency Planning Tool)
ready.adcouncil.org/beprepared/quickshare.html
(Emergency Contacts)

Ready is a national campaign designed to educate and empower Americans to prepare for and respond to emergencies including natural disasters and potential terrorist attacks. The goal of the campaign is to get the public involved and ultimately to increase the level of basic preparedness across the nation. Online tools allow visitors to prepare a printable Family Emergency Plan, and create a list of contacts and a meeting place for emergency situations.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
500 C Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20472
800-621-FEMA (3362)
www.fema.gov

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is an independent agency of the federal government, reporting to the president. FEMA’s web site provides general information and resources on what to do if you have been affected by a natural disaster or an emergency situation.

American Red Cross
National Headquarters
2025 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006
800-REDCROSS (733-2767 Disaster Assistance)
202-303 5000
www.redcross.org

The American Red Cross provides domestic and international disaster relief, community services and support, and information and training on health and safety issues. The web site provides a wealth of information and resources on emergency preparedness and disaster assistance.

The Salvation Army
615 Slaters Lane
P.O. Box 269
Alexandria, VA 22313
703-684-5500
www.salvationarmyusa.org

The Salvation Army provides domestic and international disaster relief, community services and support.

Alzheimer’s Association
National Headquarters
225 N. Michigan Avenue, Floor 17
Chicago, IL 60601
800-272-3900
www.alz.org

A nonprofit organization dedicated to researching the preventions, cures and treatments of Alzheimer’s disease and other related disorders, and providing support and assistance to affected patients and their families. There are 200 local chapters in the United States. Call the toll-free number or visit the web site to find the chapter nearest you.