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Your preparedness guide for any emergency

Last summer's widespread power outages in the Northeast and raging wildfires in the West, this spring's tornadoes in the Midwest, and the ongoing threat of terror attacks throughout the country are reminders of the need to take reasonable steps to prepare for the unexpected, even the unthinkable.



Illustration by Elliot Park

"The kinds of things we recommend you do to respond to a natural disaster are basically the same things we encourage you to do to prepare for a terror attack," says Susan Neely, the assistant secretary for public affairs at the Department of Homeland Security. Namely, know the needed steps, practice with your family, create a communication plan, stock supplies, and be ready to act.

You can't rely solely on the government to protect you in a disaster. A recent government report found that planning for catastrophes is usually inadequate because it has been conducted without regional coordination.

Here's a concise guide to preparing for any emergency, plus specific advice from federal officials about potassium iodide, the one over-the-counter drug they say some families should have on hand in case of a nuclear leak or attack.

Investigate likely dangers. Ask your local American Red Cross chapter or county emergency-management office to mail you or refer you to information about the most likely disasters in your area. Ask specifically about the warning signals, evacuation routes, and emergency services in your community as well as where to seek shelter. You should also find out what the disaster plans at your family's jobs, schools, or day-care centers require you to do.

In addition, it's wise to create a family preparedness plan:

Stock up. Consider storing the following basic supplies in a "go-bag" for home use or evacuation: at least three days' worth of nonperishable food, water, and essential medicines; toiletries and clothing; iodine tablets or bleach to disinfect water if you can't boil it; candles and matches; flashlights or battery-powered lamps; battery-operated TV or radio; first-aid kit and book; extra eyeglasses, keys, cash, and batteries; and copies of important documents (such as birth certificates and passports). Consider keeping separate go-bags (excluding the documents) at work and in your car. You may also want to keep your car's tank at least half full, since gas pumps may not work if there's no electric power.

Know the safe spots. The safest locations in your home include load-

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bearing interior walls or doorways during an earthquake and the basement during a tornado or nuclear emergency. For more information, check out the Web sites in the box below.

Know how to shut down. Teach family members how and when to turn off the water, gas, and electricity in case of damaged utility lines.

Get ready to rendezvous. Designate two places where your family will reunite after a disaster: one near your home and another outside your neighborhood. Give all family members a wallet card with relevant addresses and phone numbers.

Create a call-in contact. After a disaster, it's often easier to call long-distance than locally. So ask someone out of state to be your family contact and tell family members to call in if they can't get to the meeting place.

Plan for pets. Pack a disaster supply kit in advance, including pet food, leashes, and veterinary records. Since pets usually aren't permitted in emergency shelters, you may have to leave them at a kennel, animal shelter, or friend's home.

A drug to stock

Federal officials advise certain consumers to keep potassium iodide on hand to protect against radiation poisoning. Consumers Union's medical consultants agree.

Potassium iodide helps protect the thyroid gland from cancer-causing radioactive iodine, a major cancer threat after a nuclear blast or accident. That's most important for babies, children, and pregnant or nursing women and least important for people over 40. No one can predict how far a radioactive plume might spread. But stocking the pills may make sense for those living within 100 miles of a nuclear plant. (Experts disagree on the distance.)

The drug is sold without a prescription and is available online at www.anbex.com and www.thyrosafe.com. Brand names include IOSAT (130 milligrams) and ThyroSafe (65 mg). For dosing information, see the Food and Drug Administration's Web site, at www.fda.gov/cder/drugprepare/KI_Q&A.htm.

Last year the FDA approved a second drug, ferric hexacyanoferrate, or Prussian blue (Radiogardase), which can protect against radiation poisoning from a "dirty bomb." But the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says the current threat is too small to ask for a prescription now.

For more information.

- For detailed disaster-kit checklists, emergency plans, and the latest threat alerts, contact the Department of Homeland Security, at www.ready.gov.
- For a household preparedness guide, check out the New York City Office of Emergency Management, at www.nyc.gov/html/oem/home.html.
- For natural-disaster planning, see the Federal Emergency Management Agency's site, at www.fema.gov/areyouready. For a children's site, go to www.fema.gov/kids/index.htm.

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