

Emergency Preparedness for Older Adults: Stay Prepared, Stay Safe

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Equip yourself with the essential knowledge and actionable steps to navigate emergencies confidently, tailored specifically for the unique needs of older adults.

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Key Takeaways

- In 2022, there were 119 natural disasters across the United States, emphasizing the critical need for emergency preparedness.
- Hearing and vision impairment increases the risk of harm during an emergency, but there are accessible solutions to ensure you're getting the care you need.

- Stress is an inevitable side-effect of emergencies and can aggravate existing health problems, like heart disease and asthma, making it more challenging to think clearly and respond effectively.
- Knowing how to use technology to access and interpret emergency alerts can significantly affect your safety.

[Emergencies](#) can strike anytime, and the impact can be particularly challenging as we age. In the United States, [119 natural disasters](#) occurred in 2022, emphasizing the critical need for emergency preparedness. ^[1]

While emergencies can be particularly challenging for older adults due to unique health and mobility issues, knowing the risks in your specific area is essential no matter what age you are.

Our Reviews Team created this comprehensive guide to empower you with actionable steps for effective emergency preparedness, including accessing timely alerts, building a robust support network, and creating a tailored emergency kit. We also included considerations for people with sensory impairments, service animals, and specific chronic diseases.

Understanding older adult emergency preparedness

Emergencies can be daunting for anyone, but as we age, we face additional challenges that can make these situations even more dangerous. Being prepared isn't just about having supplies, it's about understanding your unique needs and potential challenges, including:

- **Transportation:** If you rely on others for transportation, access to a vehicle that can take you and any necessary equipment (such as a

wheelchair, oxygen machine, or other assistive device) out of harm's way is essential.

- **Mobility issues:** Reduced mobility can make evacuating quickly or moving to a safer location difficult.
- **Medication management:** If you rely on medications, they may be hard to access during an emergency.
- **Cognitive challenges:** Cognitive impairment, like **dementia**, can affect judgment and decision-making in high-stress situations.

To ensure you're prepared, here are some action steps you can take:

1. **Self-assessment:** Take note of your physical limitations and medical needs. Can you walk long distances, or do you require medical equipment? Do you require daily medication?
2. **Consult your doctor:** Discuss your findings with your health care provider to identify potential solutions and accommodations you can arrange in advance.

Considerations for hearing and visual impairments

Hearing and visual challenges can significantly impact your ability to respond to emergencies. According to data from the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, many older adults may not actively **treat or seek help for their hearing loss**.^[2]

"Many older adults don't recognize hearing loss as an issue because the loss is so gradual," said **Christopher Norman**, a geriatric nurse practitioner based in New York. "According to the American Speech and Hearing Association, it's important to have a hearing screening every three years after the age of 50."

Research shows about [25% of adults over age 65](#) have impaired hearing, which increases to 50% after age 75. ^[3] Of those over 70 with hearing loss, less than 30% have used hearing aids. ^[2] Similarly, a recent study found nearly 28% of U.S. adults over 71 had vision impairment, increasing the risk of injury during emergencies. ^[3]

Consider whether you have these impairments:

- [Hearing loss](#): Difficulty hearing can prevent you from receiving timely warnings or instructions, like alarms and sirens.
- [Visual impairments](#): Reduced vision can make it especially challenging when electricity goes out, navigating unfamiliar environments, and reading emergency instructions.

Action steps to take:

1. **Self-assessment**: Evaluate your hearing and vision capabilities. Do you find it hard to hear alarms or have difficulty reading small print? Is your eyeglass prescription up-to-date? Are your hearing aids in good working order?
2. **Consult a doctor**: If you've never addressed your hearing or vision loss, it may be a good time to seek diagnoses and treatments, such as hearing aids and glasses.
3. **Adaptive tools**: Consider investing in [specialized alarms](#) and emergency equipment designed for people with sensory impairments. Mobile apps are an accessible technology that can also inform you of emergencies, keep details in order, and track your location. Research and get to know the best apps for your needs. ^[4]

The role of stress in emergency planning

Stress is an inevitable consequence of emergencies and can aggravate existing health conditions, making it even more challenging to respond effectively.

Elevated stress levels can:

- Aggravate chronic diseases, like heart disease and asthma
- Impair cognitive function, affecting decision-making
- Lead to panic, which can be paralyzing in emergencies

Why planning is crucial

- A well-thought-out emergency plan can serve as a roadmap, reducing the risk of stress-induced errors.
- Share and practice your plan with your caregivers and support network, which can provide a sense of control and reduce stress levels.

Create an emergency plan

In an emergency, having a well-planned evacuation route can be a lifesaver. This section guides you through the steps to research and chart your evacuation routes for different types of disasters, ensuring you're prepared when it matters most.

Understand the risk of disaster

Knowing the types of disasters most likely to affect your area is crucial for effective emergency preparedness. The most **common emergencies** include

hurricanes, wildfires, earthquakes, severe storms, and public health crises. ^[5] According to the American Red Cross, [everyone should prepare](#) for floods, heat waves, power outages, thunderstorms, winter storms, and CBRNEs (chemical, biological, radioactive, and nuclear emergencies), regardless of location. ^[6]

Action steps to take:

1. Research local disaster history and consult your [community resources](#). The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides a [local search page](#), which allows you to access information about past declared disasters, emergency response resources, and disaster recovery centers specific to your area. ^[7]
2. Speak with local authorities and visit your state's or city's emergency management website.
3. Create your own disaster/emergency plan. You can download a [Family Disaster Plan](#) from the American Red Cross.

Access emergency alerts

Staying informed is vital during emergencies. Knowing how to access and interpret emergency alerts can significantly affect your safety.

How to access alerts

- Call your local non-emergency police line to ask about community alert systems, so you know what to look for. Ask whether your town or county has a downloadable emergency alert and update app.

- Download apps, like the FEMA app, for real-time alerts. You can download the FEMA app on [Google Play](#) and the [Apple App Store](#). You can also download the app via text messaging. On an Android device, text “ANDROID” to 43362 (4FEMA); On an Apple Device, text “APPLE” to 43362 (4FEMA).

Interpreting alerts

- “Prepare to Evacuate” = Get your emergency kit ready
- “Evacuate Now” = Leave immediately
- “Shelter in Place” = Stay indoors and secure your home

For those with hearing or visual impairments

- Use a combination of visual and audio emergency alert systems. The National Association of the Deaf [recommends using visual alerts](#), like texts and emails. Your local government may have specific alert accommodations for those with hearing loss. ^[8]
- The National Weather Service recommends having a [weather radio](#) in all homes, including the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities. For those with visual or hearing impairments, you can add attachments that add [bed shakers or lighted text alerts](#) to your [weather radio](#). ^{[9] [10]}
- People with visual impairments can enable voice notifications on their phones and use [other mobile apps](#).
- The FCC requires all televised emergency alerts to be in [audio and visual forms](#). ^[11]

- The American Foundation for the Blind identifies several mobile apps for those with [visual impairments during emergencies](#). ^[12]

Download our [State-by-State Emergency Preparedness Guide](#) below to stay informed.

Build a support network

A support network is not only comforting, it can be a lifeline in emergencies. Here's how to build and maintain a network of friends and family who can assist you during emergencies:

1. **Identify key contacts:** Make a list of friends, family members, fellow church members, and neighbors who live nearby and can assist you in an emergency. Confirm with each their agreement to be available in an emergency.
2. **Establish roles:** Clearly define what role each person will play. For example, one person could be responsible for helping you evacuate, while another could be in charge of checking on you regularly.
3. **Set up multiple communication methods:** Relying on a single form of communication can be risky. Here are some options:
 1. **Cellphone:** Keep it fully charged
 2. **Spare cellphone:** Keep a basic, fully charged backup phone
 3. **HAM radio:** Useful when cell networks are down
4. **Establish regular check-ins:** A routine for regular check-ins with your support network keeps everyone informed and ensures your emergency plans remain up-to-date.

5. **Conduct emergency drills:** Occasional drills with your support network will ensure everyone knows their roles and responsibilities.

Create your emergency kit

An emergency kit is your go-to resource when disaster strikes. Tailoring it to your specific needs and the types of emergencies you're likely to encounter is essential. The first step is to plan for two scenarios: evacuating or sheltering in place for two weeks.

Create a kit for each:

- **Evacuation**: Your kit should contain essentials that are lightweight and easy to carry. Think about items you'll need immediately, such as identifying information, important documents, medications, and a change of clothes. Store this kit close to the door where you can easily access it. ^[13]
- **Sheltering in place**: When you're staying put, your kit can be more extensive. Stock up on non-perishable food items, like canned foods and water, and assemble a kit with medical supplies and medications to last two weeks. ^[14]

Storage for your kit:


- Consider using a rolling suitcase for easy mobility or an easy-to-carry duffle bag or backpack.
- Store your home kit in an easily accessible location.
- Make sure to inform your support network about its location.

- Periodically review and update your kit to ensure all items are in good condition and medications or food haven't expired.

What to include:

Stock Up on These Essentials for Emergencies

ncoa | Adviser
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- Important documents and health information
- Medicine
- Non-perishables
- Bedding
- Communication
- Phone contacts
- Printed maps
- Change of clothes
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Glasses and hearing aids
- Personal hygiene items
- Extra essentials
- Pet supplies

Paperwork

- Bring identification, medical records, [medication lists](#), emergency contacts, insurance policies, and bank account records.

- Save these important documents electronically or make copies and store them in a waterproof container or sealed plastic bag.

Medical supplies

- First aid kit
- Prescriptions, backup hearing aid batteries, mobility devices
- Non-prescription medications, like pain relievers, anti-diarrheal medication, antacids, or laxatives
- Special considerations for those with sensory impairments: extra-large print medication labels and tactile markers for medication
- Store your supplies in a separate, waterproof container or sealed plastic bags

Other kit essentials

- Water (enough for each person to drink and sanitize with)
- Food (non-perishable food to last a few days)
- Can opener
- Garbage bags
- Extra batteries
- Whistle (in case you need help)

- Face mask (for illness or to reduce inhalation of toxins)
- Tools to turn off utilities, like a wrench
- Radio (battery-powered or weather radio with tone alert)
- Cellphone with portable chargers

Situation-dependent extras

- Soap, hand sanitizer, and disinfectant wipes
- Prescription eyeglasses and contact lens solution
- Pet food and extra water
- Cash or traveler's checks
- Bedding, like sleeping bags and warm blankets
- Change of clothes and shoes
- Fire extinguisher
- Matches
- Personal hygiene items
- Paper plates, cups, utensils
- Paper and pencil

Plan an evacuation route

- Consult with local authorities to determine which locations are designated for emergency shelters this year.
- Pinpoint multiple emergency destinations, like a distant friend's house or a motel, ideally in opposite directions, to give you options.
- If you have pets, locate accommodations that will welcome them, as most public shelters [only permit service animals](#). ^[16]
- Know alternative routes and various transportation methods for leaving your area.
- Heed the guidance of local officials, and remember, you might have to evacuate on foot, depending on the nature of the emergency.
- Keep paper maps in your emergency kit in case you lose cellular service.

When a disaster happens

When an emergency strikes, swift and informed action is crucial. Here are key steps to take:

1. **Stay calm:** Keep your composure to think clearly and make better decisions.
2. **Check alerts:** Refer to emergency alerts for specific guidance on whether to evacuate or shelter in place.
3. **Activate the plan:** Carry out your pre-established emergency plan, whether it's grabbing your emergency kit for evacuation or hunkering down at home.
4. **Contact support:** Reach out to your support network to inform them of your situation and next steps.

Emergency resources for older adults

Here is a list of common [emergency resources](#):

- **FEMA:** The [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) offers a wide range of resources, including checklists and guides for emergency preparedness.
- **American Red Cross:** Their [Emergency Preparedness section](#) provides general advice and specific guidelines for various types of disasters.
- **CDC:** The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) offers a comprehensive guide on emergency preparedness, specifically for older adults.
- **National Weather Service:** NWS [Safety Tips](#) can help you prepare for weather-related emergencies.
- **Local government websites:** Often, your city or county website will have localized emergency preparedness information.
- **Community centers:** Local community centers often offer emergency resources, like maps and local emergency contacts.

Here are additional resources tailored to specific situations:

- **Service animals:** The Americans With Disabilities Act's (ADA) [guide on emergency preparedness](#) for service animals offers tips on preparing your service animal for emergencies.

- **Wheelchair users:** The United Spinal Association's ["Ready to Roll" emergency preparedness guide](#) provides specific advice for people using wheelchairs.
- **Dialysis patients:** The [Kidney Community Emergency Response](#) program offers resources for those dependent on dialysis treatments.
- **Respiratory issues:** The American Lung Association's [emergency preparedness page](#) has guidelines for those with respiratory conditions.
- **Cancer:** The [National Cancer](#) Institute provides information for cancer patients during emergencies.
- **Diabetes:** The [Association of Diabetes Care & Education Specialists](#) provides tips on how to prepare for emergencies.
- **Mental health:** The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's [disaster preparedness site](#) provides resources for managing stress and mental health during emergencies.
- **Nutritional needs:** The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' [emergency preparedness guide](#) offers tips about food safety.
- **Online education and downloadables:** The University of Colorado Denver Center for Inclusive Design and Engineering has an impressive library of resources and forms tailored to older adults and people with disabilities, which you can download to your computer, fill out, and save as digital files or print for reference. The [Emergency Preparedness Services](#) page includes resource documents and an interactive online

course, called [Learn How to Keep Yourself Safe When Disaster Strikes](#). (Scroll to the bottom of the page to find the course.) You can find additional forms on [Emergency Preparedness Resources for Persons With Disabilities](#) and [Surviving in Place: Be Your Own First Responder](#).

- **Post-disaster resources:** NCOA.org provides a list of [post-disaster resources](#) to help older adults get back on track after facing a disaster.

Bottom line

By taking proactive steps to be prepared before an emergency occurs, you not only safeguard your well-being but also gain peace of mind. This guide aims to be your comprehensive resource for emergency preparedness, offering actionable tips and expert advice—from creating an emergency kit to establishing a communication plan—to help you navigate unexpected situations with confidence and resilience.

Henry Mitchell, deputy director for the [Office of Emergency Preparedness and Response](#) at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, told us: “There are steps older adults can take to keep themselves, their loved ones, and our communities safe and healthy.”

Those steps include, but are not limited to:

- Sign up for emergency alerts with your local public safety agency (emergency management, law enforcement, etc.)
- Keep a list of all your current medications, including vitamins and supplements. Print a copy of this list and keep it in your wallet or purse.

You can share this information with a health care professional or caregiver.

- Check on your friends and family who are also older.
- Know the risks and hazards in your area, so you know what you may have to deal with in the event of a disaster.
- Make a list of any medical or equipment needs in case of evacuation, and have a plan for bringing them with you in a disaster.
- Cultivate a support network of family, friends, caregivers, and others who can help you during an emergency. Make an emergency plan and practice it with them.
- Keep a little extra food and water on hand in your home.
- Stay up-to-date on all of your recommended vaccines, including flu and COVID-19.

Have questions about this article? Email us at reviewsteam@ncoa.org.

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