

# Older Adults and Disasters

## How to Be Prepared and Assist Others



AMERICAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION



By 2050, one in every five Americans will be 65 years or older. Older adults are not only the least prepared for disasters but also have the highest rate of disaster-related deaths. The number of disasters is on the rise. Almost daily, reports of wild fires, industrial explosions, extensive power outages, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornadoes dominate the national news. Older adults are more at risk during all phases of a disaster, from life-threatening challenges during evacuation to negative psychological consequences during the recovery period.

Not all older adults are equally vulnerable to disasters. For example, a 76-year-old man living independently in the community would most likely have different strengths and weaknesses than an 84-year-old man living in a skilled nursing facility. Advanced age in and of itself does NOT make a person vulnerable.

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- › Additional online resources

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## VULNERABILITY AND PREVENTABILITY

With advanced age, some older adults are at greater risk for physical and mental health conditions, may be socially isolated, and may experience cognitive changes, including slower reaction times and reduced problem-solving abilities.

In addition, where you live greatly affects the levels of social support and services available during a disaster. Nursing homes, for instance, are required by law to provide assistance in disasters. In contrast, older adults who live at home without home care services can be overlooked both by emergency responders and by family members who do not live in the same community.

The good news is that many fatalities, injuries, and damages caused by disasters can be prevented or minimized with adequate resources and planning. And even in advanced age, many older adults can be effective volunteers in times of disaster. If you are willing and capable of volunteering, you can be a valuable resource when assistance is needed most.

## SOCIAL SUPPORT MATTERS

Some disasters may force you to evacuate and relocate, which can disrupt your social world and may cause physical and psychological health problems. Support from others is critical. For most older adults, a social support network largely consists of family, friends, and neighbors. These individuals are often the first to assist during a disaster and play an important role afterward, when people must cope with destroyed property, loss of electricity or phones, interrupted daily routines, or disruption of community resources (e.g., Meals on Wheels, home health aide).

Unfortunately, members of your social support network are often affected by the same disaster. Before disasters strike, talk with your family, friends, and neighbors about the amount and type of support each of them will provide.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

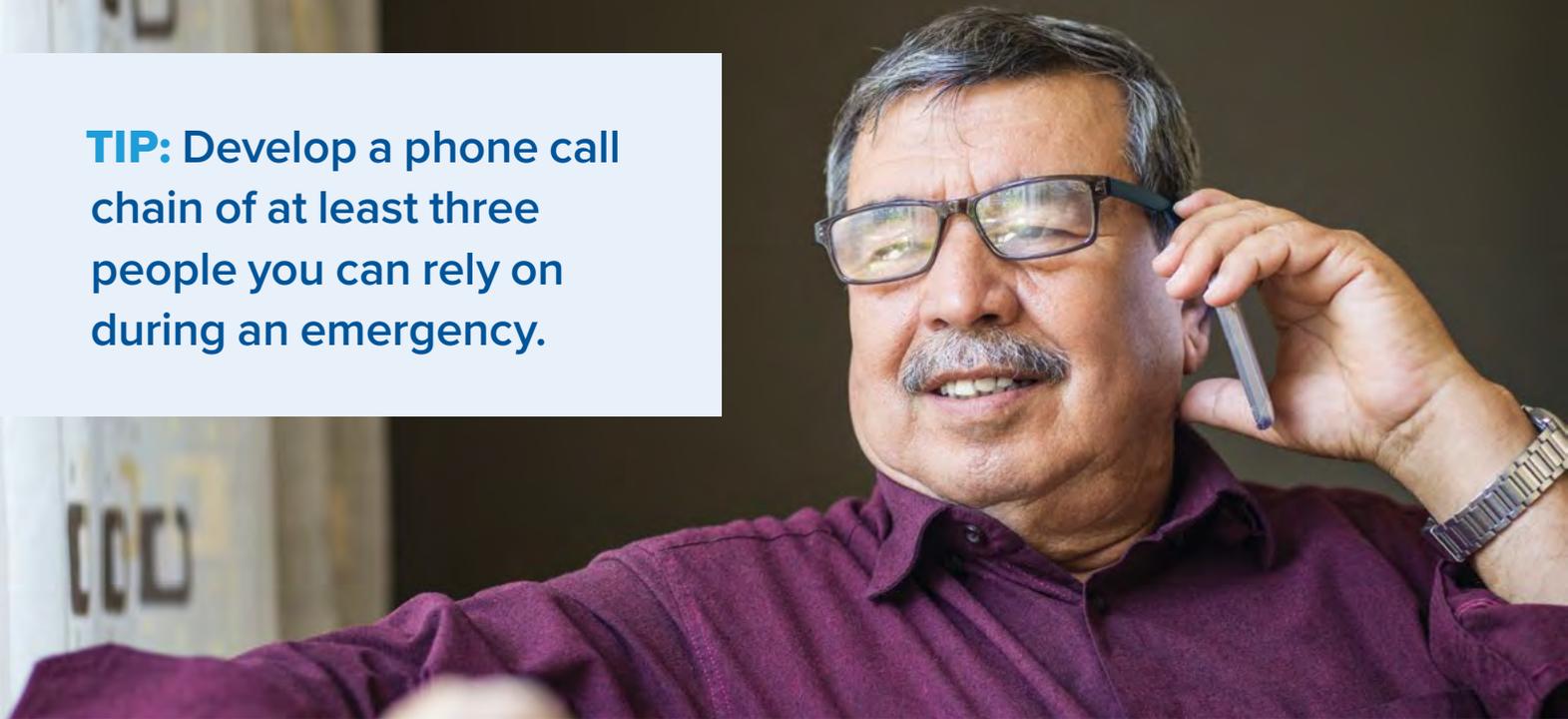
**Ready.Gov** offers a variety of downloadable guides for older adults, caregivers, and planners, including **Preparing Makes Sense for Older Americans. Get Ready Now.**

The **Red Cross** offers information on preparing for emergencies, including emergency first aid kits, making plans, and staying informed during an emergency or disaster: [redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies#About](https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies#About)

The **Alzheimer's Association** provides resources for older adults with dementia and Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers: [alz.org/care/alzheimers-dementia-disaster-preparedness.asp](https://www.alz.org/care/alzheimers-dementia-disaster-preparedness.asp)

The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** provides links to tools and information on personal preparedness for older adults and their caregivers: [cdc.gov/aging/emergency/preparedness.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/aging/emergency/preparedness.htm)

**TIP:** Develop a phone call chain of at least three people you can rely on during an emergency.



## DISASTER PREPAREDNESS TIPS

- ❑ **Create a personal support network** of at least three people you can rely on during an emergency. Develop a phone call chain: You call the first person, who calls the next person, who then calls the next.
- ❑ **Establish a meeting place.** Designate two meeting places—one near home and an alternate location—so relatives and friends know where to find you. If your location changes, notify people in your personal support network as soon as possible so they know your status.
- ❑ **Make sure contact information** for all relatives, family members, and health care professionals is **up to date and accessible** (e.g., in a purse, wallet, or suitcase).
- ❑ **Consider purchasing a medical ID bracelet** engraved with your medical conditions, medications, allergies, and emergency contacts if you have health issues.
- ❑ **Obtain copies of your community's disaster plan and evacuation map.** Store them in multiple locations, including your vehicle's glove compartment. If you live in a senior residence or assisted living community, ask about procedures for sheltering in place and evacuation, as well as what supplies and generators are available.
- ❑ **Make travel arrangements ahead of time.** If you cannot drive or do not own a car, make a contingency plan that includes contact information about who would pick you up (as well as an emergency backup ride). Tune in to your local radio station for evacuation directions. Evacuate as early as possible to avoid traffic congestion.
- ❑ **Participate in emergency response drills** if they are offered and learn about normal psychological reactions to disaster (e.g., stress, fatigue, irritability). Be aware of resources that can help address concerns and make recovery easier (see [list of additional resources](#)).

# YOUR EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS KIT

Taking the time to prepare yourself and those you care about before disasters strike can be a life saver. Having an emergency preparedness kit at the ready is an important step you can take. At minimum a kit should include:

- A 3–6-day supply of medications you and those you care for are currently taking. Include a current list of medications and dosage details. To locate an open pharmacy after a disaster, go to [RxOpen.org](https://www.rxopen.org).
- An insulated bag that can hold a 2-week supply of any medications requiring refrigeration (such as insulin). Always keep ice packs available in your freezer.
- A list of health problems and related conditions you and those you care for may have, along with the names, phone numbers, and specialties of the doctors who provide the care.
- A list of necessary medical equipment or aids you and those you care for will need and where they are stored.
- A 3-day supply of water (at least 1 gallon/day), nonperishable foods, disposable plates and cutlery, and basic cooking utensils.
- A flashlight, manual can opener, battery-powered or hand-cranked radio, extra batteries or solar charger, duct tape, and waterproof matches.
- An emergency whistle.
- An extra set of car and house keys.
- A cellphone with charger.
- Clothing for you and those you care for, including warm coat, hat, mittens and scarf, rain gear, sturdy shoes, and a blanket. Consider labeling all your items.
- At least \$100 in cash. Cash machines will not work without electrical power, and needed food and services may require cash payment.
- Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and other health insurance information for you and those you care for, credit and identification cards, as well as copies of legal documents (e.g., power of attorney, advanced directive).
- Entertainment items to pass the time (e.g., books, crossword puzzles, knitting).
- Water, food, and other needed supplies (e.g., medications) if you or those you care for have pets.



**TIP: Visit [RxOpen.org](https://www.rxopen.org) to locate an open pharmacy after a disaster.**



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