

# Shelter-In-Place



Part of the Public Safety Office's "Be Ready" series

Often when a disaster strikes, our first instinct is to go outside where we know it's safe. Sometimes, however, staying put is actually the smartest thing to do. Chemical spills, radiological accidents, terrorist incidents, and even severe smoke from fires can make the outside world a very dangerous place to be and breathe.

While sheltering-in-place is designed to create a *temporary* protective barrier between you and outside contaminants, knowing how to "shelter-in-place" can be just as important as having a disaster kit. It's not instant though—it takes pre-planning and forethought. Here's how to do it.

## Designate a Room

Choose a room in your home where your entire family can comfortably stay together for several hours, preferably one with as few doors, vents, and windows as possible. A master bedroom with an attached bedroom is often ideal. Since many air contaminants are heavier than air, that is they hover on the ground, an upstairs room is best (if you have one). Never use a basement or other underground room for this purpose.

Look around the room (or rooms if you chose a master suite or similar). Using a tape measure, measure every single door, window, and vent (ceiling, wall, or floor-mounted), as well as all the light switch plates, electrical outlet covers, and even the cable and phone outlets. Include the fireplace (if applicable). Write down all of your measurements, adding four inches to each direction (for example, 20"x32" becomes 24"x36").

## Create Your Barriers

You will need the following supplies, some of which you may need to visit a hardware store to find:

- 2-4 mil. plastic sheeting
- Duct tape or cloth tape, at least 2" wide
- Bath towels (one for each door)

- Permanent marker
- A tote box to store it all in, preferably plastic

If you don't already have a disaster kit, or if you want to have a small, dedicated kit for sheltering-in-place, also get:

- Portable AM/FM radio and extra batteries
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Non-perishable snacks
- Water, at least one gallon per person in your household
- Any other special needs items (such as diapers/formula, special medication, etc.)

Using a pair of scissors, cut the plastic sheeting to the enlarged measurements. Make sure that it fits over its intended location, overhanging each side by about two inches, then use the permanent marker to label it for easy identification later ("bedroom door," "cable outlet," etc.)

Once you're done, fold up your plastic sheeting and place it in the box, along with the towels and duct tape. If you purchased separate emergency supplies, place those in the box as well. Keep the box in an easily accessible location in the designated room.

## Sheltering-In-Place

If local officials advise that you should shelter-in-place, do so quickly. Go inside (don't forget your pets!) and tightly shut and lock every door and window in your home. The tighter, the better, as your home itself is the first layer of defense against airborne contaminants. Turn off any fans and set your thermostat so that the heater/air conditioner will turn off and stay off. Put out any lit fireplaces, and tightly close the dampers. If you have one and you want to do so, grab your disaster kit and take it with you, unless you have reason to believe it has been contaminated.

Go into your pre-designated safe room, close and lock the doors and windows, and pull out your

shelter kit. Match up the plastic pieces to where they go and tape them down, taping the corners first and then along the entire edge of each side. Be generous with the tape, since you don't want the plastic to fall. Wet the bath towels and shove them into the cracks under the doors to tightly seal. If you have a phone, television, computer, or lamp plugged in, you may leave it that way, but make sure to tightly seal it off with the tape. Non-essential items should be unplugged before sealing off the outlet.

Turn on your television, radio, or computer and turn to a local news station for updates. DO NOT come out until local officials advise you that it is safe to do so.

### **Once It's Safe**

When local officials advise you that it is safe to come out, you may start breaking down your shelter. Remove and discard the tape, and fold up the plastic sheeting to put back into your kit. It may be a good idea to wash it off before putting it away (easiest way for the larger pieces is to use a garden hose, then let them air dry in the sun). Thoroughly air out your home by opening up all the windows and doors in your home, and turn on your ventilation system to help disperse any contaminants that may have gotten inside your home, your heater, or your air conditioner.

Replace any items from your shelter kit that you used, such as tape or any snacks/water, and put it away.

### **What If?**

If you're in your vehicle: Pull over to the side of the road and stop in a safe location. Tightly roll up all of your windows, turn off the vents (closing them if possible), and shut off the motor to avoid drawing outside air in through the engine. Breathe through a dampened cloth and listen to the radio for any instructions.

If you're not at home (outside a vehicle): If you're outside, go into the nearest building. If you're in a building, stay inside. Go to the most protected place you can find, furthest from any windows or doors. Breathe through a dampened cloth and wait for instructions.

If you're home but your family members aren't: Follow the shelter-in-place directions above and go into your safe room. It will be natural to want to get your kids from school or daycare, or wait for your spouse, but DON'T. Once you've got your plastic sheeting taped up, don't take it down for any reason until instructed that it is safe to do so, not even to let someone in.

### **Some Things to Remember**

Generally, you should shelter where you are, since the sooner you establish your barriers the more effective they will be. Don't go somewhere to shelter unless directed to do so by local officials.

Remember, events that would require sheltering-in-place usually don't last long. Air is constantly circulating, and wind will eventually disperse contaminants to non-hazardous levels or out of the area entirely.

Use your good judgement. If you can see large amounts of debris or particles in the air, you may want to shelter-in-place even if officials haven't yet said anything.

If your home is damaged (such as from a nearby explosion), you may want to shut off your utilities (DON'T shut off gas unless absolutely necessary, as you cannot turn it back on yourself). Also shut off your utilities if local officials advise you should do so. This is why having a portable, battery-operated radio and flashlights is important.

For more information, visit the following websites:

Ready America: Deciding to Stay or Go

<http://www.ready.gov/america/makeaplan/stayingput.html>

Shelter-In-Place: Homeland Security News

<http://www.nationalterroralert.com/shelterinplace>