

Special Needs: Elderly, Disabled, and Children



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

As we all know, disasters affect everyone. We all have family members or neighbors who may need assistance dealing with the initial impact of a disaster, as well as its aftereffects.

Here are some tips for people with special needs, and those who may be called upon to help them following a major incident.

Elderly/Disabled

- When doing your home "hazard hunt," don't forget to secure medical equipment, such as oxygen tanks and life support systems.
- Open up pathways within your home as much as possible, to reduce the blockage of exit paths during an earthquake.
- Keep walking aids, such as canes and walkers, nearby at all times, and keep extras in various rooms throughout the home, as well as in your vehicle.
- Have a whistle near your bed (preferably with your "immediate response kit," where it will be easily accessible) to signal for help if needed. Don't keep it on a nightstand, where it might fall off, or in a drawer, which might open up and send its contents flying during an earthquake. (Don't wear it around your neck while sleeping, as this creates a strangulation hazard.)
- When putting together your disaster kit, also get an extra set of batteries for any hearing aids that you might use.
- Keep extra emergency supplies near your bedside. Elderly and disabled people's limited mobility can make it likely that you may need to stay in your room for awhile until help arrives.
- Plug a security light into each room. These lights plug into any regular outlet, and automatically turn on when the power goes out. In addition they can be manually turned off if a gas

leak arises.

- Keep a list of medications, allergies, special medical needs and equipment, physicians' names and phone numbers, pharmacies, and family members with you at all times. Keep a spare copy in your disaster kit. This information may be critical if you get injured.
- If you live alone, or are ever left home alone (even for short periods of time), find two trusted neighbors who will agree to check on you in the event of a disaster. Make sure that they are familiar with your special needs and the location of your disaster kit, as well as how to operate any special equipment you use. Give each of them a spare key to your home.
- When an earthquake hits, get to a safe location if you are able to do so, such as under a sturdy table. If you are in bed, stay in bed, and cover your head and neck. If you are in a wheelchair, go to a doorway that has no door, lock your wheels, and cover your head and neck with your hands.
- After a disaster, turn on your portable radio and listen for news reports and instructions from emergency personnel. Cooperate fully with disaster workers and emergency personnel, and comply with any instructions given to you.
- If your home is inhabitable, it is the best and safest place to be. If you choose to leave your home and you are able to do so, change your answering machine message or leave a note at the door telling family members and concerned neighbors where you can be found.

Children

- Young children will be particularly frightened by a disaster, so make sure you have comforting items for them in your disaster kit, such as extras of their favorite toys and stuffed animals.
- Determine what you will do with your children

in the event of a disaster. If you decide to evacuate your home, even temporarily, consider having a playpen or other portable “containment area” to keep young children from wandering off from the shelter site or gathering place and getting lost or in danger during the post-disaster chaos.

- Find two trustworthy neighbors that will be willing to check on any children that might be home alone during a disaster. Make sure they know any special medical or other needs your children have, and give them each a spare key to your home.
- Keep a spare stroller in your vehicle for each baby and toddler that you have. These don't have to be fancy (a simple small “umbrella” stroller will do), but will allow you to keep your children nearby and secure while you are in the process of figuring out what to do post-disaster.
- Keep spare closed-toed shoes (such as sneakers) for your young children in your disaster kit, in addition to the pair we already recommend. Young children and babies are particularly prone to losing shoes.
- Teach your children how to “drop, cover, and hold” and practice regularly.
- Plug security lights into each room, so that your children can still find their way if the power goes out. Many young children don't like the dark, especially following a disaster.
- When creating your evacuation plan, make sure to include your children in the planning, and have regular disaster drills. Much like fire drills in school, this regular practice will help your children remember what to do during the chaos of a disaster.
- If you have pets, make sure before a disaster to discuss with your children the possibilities that you might not be able to take them with you if you evacuate, or that they may have to stay with someone else for awhile. Children tend to grow extremely attached to their pets and might need help understanding why they're not with the family post-disaster.

For more information, visit the following websites:

Ready America—Older Americans: <http://www.ready.gov/america/getakit/seniors.html>

Ready Kids: <http://www.ready.gov/kids>

American Red Cross Disaster Preparedness Information: <http://www.prepare.org/>

Sesame Street—Let's Get Ready!: <http://www.sesamestreet.org/ready>

National Institutes of Health (NIH) National Library of Medicine, Outreach Activities & Resources: <http://sis.nlm.nih.gov/outreach/specialpopulation sanddisasters.html>