

A Patient's Guide to Emergency Preparedness

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No one can accurately predict when the next public health crisis, terrorist threat, environmental disaster, or other emergency (natural or man-made), may occur or how severe it will be. Fortunately, in recent years, states, communities, and many hospitals, medical clinics and businesses have been developing disaster plans. Nevertheless, businesses, medical offices, pharmacies, and educational institutions may have to close or curtail operations. Travel could be restricted. Essential services including sanitation, water, power and social services could be interrupted for indefinite periods. Additionally, the local food supply could be affected and usual public gatherings may need to be cancelled. During such an emergency, hospitals and medical clinics will be overwhelmed with severely injured or ill individuals as well as the “worried well.” Their usual operations will be impaired by staff and/or supply shortages, and patients will be triaged according to severity of injury or illness. Accordingly, it is vitally important that patients take appropriate steps now to safeguard their health during emergency situations.

This Guide will assist you and your family to anticipate challenges in the event that a public health crisis disrupts your normal work, school, and social routines and to take appropriate precautions to reduce the risks of suffering an adverse health outcome. Such planning reduces public panic and ensures that those most in need are given appropriate attention in an emergency.

General Considerations

Electrical outages, electronic disruptions, or cyber-terrorist attacks will make computer access difficult, so print out any medical information you may have stored on a computer or disk. This information should be in an easily accessible location known by all family members:

- ❏ Prepare a complete medical history including current medical conditions, prescription medications, necessary medical devices and blood type along with a copy of your Durable Power of Attorney and Living Will;
- ❏ Maintain a list of your current health care providers, their addresses and telephone numbers;
- ❏ Maintain a list of telephone numbers for local emergency services, emergency road service providers, and the regional poison control center;
- ❏ Retain a copy of your health insurance and provider outpatient treatment registration cards;
- ❏ Inquire of your primary care physician and specialists what the office protocol is in the event of a disaster including:



- ▶ Notification procedures if regularly scheduled patient appointments or clinics are cancelled;
 - ▶ Procedure for rescheduling appointments or other outpatient treatment (e.g., physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy) after cancellation;
 - ▶ Alternative community resources that provide medical care; and
 - ▶ Best means of obtaining emergency medical treatment.
- ❏ Maintain an emergency first aid kit and ensure that the supplies are periodically rotated to preserve the expiration date;
 - ❏ Retain a list of expenses with appropriate receipts incurred during an emergency if possible since they may qualify for deductible tax expenses; and
 - ❏ Keep certifications in basic first aid class and CPR current.

Patients with Chronic Medical Conditions, Special Needs, and/or Disabilities

Patients with chronic medical conditions (e.g., diabetes, end-stage renal disease requiring dialysis, or cancer requiring chemotherapy or radiation therapy) or with mental, physical, and emotional disabilities often are overlooked in state and local disaster plans. It therefore is imperative for each individual to be as prepared as possible in the event of an emergency since their usual medication or treatment regimens may be interrupted.

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- Discuss with your physician the potential problems, recommended interventions, and defining symptoms of your condition that should trigger immediate care;
- Discuss with your physician how a disruption in your usual activities of daily living and/or increased stress may affect your chronic medical condition or other disability to understand how you may be affected during an emergency situation;
- Retain a list of current over-the-counter and prescription medicines or copies of the prescription medication labels;
- Maintain a ten day supply of over-the-counter medications that are periodically rotated to preserve the expiration date. Since some insurance carriers limit prescription medications to 30-90 day supplies, you may wish to ask your physician to prescribe a short supply of essential medications for an emergency that are periodically rotated to preserve the expiration date if your budget permits. Alternatively, you should inquire of your physician what the emergency supply plans for essential medications are.
- Maintain a ten day supply of medical supplies (*e.g.*, blood glucose test strips for diabetics) that are rotated to preserve the expiration date;
- Inspect durable medical equipment (*e.g.*, oxygen tank, air mattress, medication infusion pump, peritoneal dialysis supplies) on a routine basis to ensure that it is in appropriate working condition, maintain replacement parts on hand (especially those that require frequent replacement), and identify alternative power sources needed to operate such equipment (*e.g.*, batteries, generator);
- Maintain a readily available list of addresses and telephone numbers of local durable medical equipment suppliers and consider establishing an account in advance;
- Establish an account with a reputable online pharmacist and consider listing an alternative address of a relative or trusted friend or colleague;
- If you receive medication through an intravenous line or port, or require transfusions of blood or blood products on a regular basis for certain hematologic disorders, then discuss alternatives with your physician;
- If you require dialysis or chemotherapy, then you should have a clear plan for receiving such services during an emergency;
- If you rely upon personal care assistants to assist in your medical care, discuss with the agency whether it has a protocol in place that is followed in the event of an emergency;

- If you are pregnant, ask your physician to explain the signs and symptoms of fetal distress, pre-eclampsia or other complications based upon your particular medical condition; and
- Consider the needs of any service animal that assists in your care.

Patients Participating in Clinical Research Trials

In addition to the actions discussed above, patients who are participating in clinical research trials should do the following:

- Retain a copy of the research study protocol and related consent form;
- Inquire whether your primary care physician can administer any necessary medication in the event of an emergency; and
- Identify other Centers of Excellence that offer clinical research studies for your particular illness within a reasonable geographic distance.

Resources

“Keep It With You” Personal Medical Information Form

A complimentary form available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) intended to be completed by both the patient and the healthcare provider to serve as an interim communication tool during an emergency. www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes/katrina/pdf/kiwy.pdf

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

A government website that provides news and information to educate individuals in planning for man-made and natural disasters. www.ready.gov

Vial of Life Project

A complimentary form designed to provide pre-hospital and hospital providers with essential details that will aid in providing appropriate medical treatment during an emergency. www.vialoflife.com

MediAlert Foundation

A nonprofit organization providing 24-hour emergency medical information and identification service. www.medicalert.org

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