



Protecting Your Family and Home After a Natural Disaster

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Recovering from a natural disaster takes time for individuals and communities. Regardless of the disaster, in the aftermath, always follow the guidance of first responders and officials in your area whose main goal is keeping the community and its members safe. If you need immediate help for mental distress, call the national Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 to connect with local resources for emotional well-being. If you are experiencing physical distress or a threat to your public safety, call 911 where Emergency Medical Services, fire, and police can be dispatched as needed.

Documenting Property Damage

As you begin disaster recovery, visit <https://www.disasterassistance.gov/> to see what state and federal resources may be available to you or your area following a disaster. It is important to document the damage to your property before cleanup begins. Documentation of property damage is necessary if you plan to file insurance claims. For more information, read the Kentucky Cooperative Extension publication, *Financial Management After a Natural Disaster* FRM-IFD.002.

Cleaning Up

If you needed to evacuate during the disaster, do not return home until local authorities say it's safe. During disaster cleanup, safety should remain your top priority. Follow these tips to stay safe while cleaning up after a natural disaster.

- Wear protective gear such as heavy gloves, hard hats or helmets, and steel-toe boots. Hazards persist after a disaster. Be cautious of unstable structures or falling objects.
- If you are working with items contaminated by sewage or flood water, wear rubber boots, gloves, and goggles. Treat all flood water as contaminated and continue with extreme caution. Wash your hands often and protect any open cuts or sores.
- Remember, electrical currents can travel through water and wet floors. Never walk through a flooded building until gas and electric services are disconnected. After any storm, stay away from fallen power lines. Even if they do not appear to be sparking, they may carry electricity that can spread through the ground and other nearby surfaces. You should assume all power lines and electrical equipment are live and receiving power.
- Take care of yourself as you clean up after a disaster. Take breaks when needed, especially if working in hot or cold weather. Stay hydrated with clean drinking water. Work with others to lift heavy objects and avoid straining or overextending yourself.

Managing and Discarding Debris

Dispose of household items you cannot sanitize, such as books, stuffed animals, baby toys, and food. If there is any doubt about an item, throw it out. For items you can sanitize, clean them using a mixture of 1 cup of bleach for every 5 gallons of

clean water. For food safety tips, read the Kentucky Cooperative Extension publication, *Keeping Food and Water Safe After a Natural Disaster* FN-IFD.002.

As you clean, place debris by the curb, keeping roadways and paths to fire hydrants, meters, and utility boxes clear. Kentucky Emergency Management recommends separating debris by category to make debris removal smoother. They recommend the following categories:

- *Vegetative Debris.* For example, leaves, plants, and tree branches.
- *Hazardous Waste.* This includes items like batteries, paint, cleaning supplies, oil, and compressed gas.
- *Electronics.* Small electronics such as televisions and computers.
- *Construction Debris.* Place furniture, carpet, and building materials together.
- *Large Appliances.* This includes items such as washers and dryers, water heaters, and refrigerators. Be sure to secure appliance doors for safety.

Your local Office of Emergency Management and local Cooperative Extension office can provide you with more information about removing debris.

Using Portable Generators

Portable generators can give temporary power and might be necessary for cleanup if access to power is limited or unavailable. However, they can create hazards if you don't use them properly. Inspect all cords for damage before plugging them into the generator. Always keep generators (and other electrical equipment) dry. Never use electrical appliances if you or the appliance are wet or are in standing water.



When running a generator, make sure you have adequate ventilation. Never use a generator in a home, garage, or near windows or doors to prevent carbon monoxide poisoning. Carbon monoxide is a colorless and odorless toxic gas. Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning include nausea, dizziness, headaches, and excessive fatigue. If you suspect carbon monoxide poisoning, get fresh air and seek immediate medical attention. Generators produce heat and remain hot after use. Keep flammable materials away from the generator, including fuel containers. Allow the generator to cool before refueling to reduce the risk of fire.

According to Safe Electricity, you should turn a generator on before plugging appliances into it. Once the generator is running, rank your electricity needs. Turn appliances and lights on one at a time to avoid overloading the unit and remember that generators are for temporary usage. For more safety tips on using a generator safely, visit <https://safeelectricity.org/public-education/tips/generator-safety/>.

Other Disaster Responses

Always stay out of disaster areas to allow emergency crews to help those in life and death situations first. Most emergency crews are overwhelmed during times of disaster. Once authorities have cleared you to return to your home and community, use extreme caution. Most safety precautions apply to a variety of disasters; however, some scenarios have added considerations for safely responding.

- **Fires.** Do not enter your home, even after the fire is out, until emergency personnel say it's OK. Fires can damage the structure of your home, so first responders need to decide if it is safe for you to go inside. Seek medical attention immediately if you have inhaled smoke or are injured.
- **Floods.** Driving in flood water is dangerous. According to the National Weather Service, six inches of water can cause most passenger cars to lose control and possibly stall; a foot of water will float many vehicles; and two feet of rushing water can carry away most vehicles including sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and pick-ups. For more information, visit <https://www.weather.gov/safety/flood-turn-around-dont-drown>. Remember, flood water can carry electricity and other safety hazards. When you return home, wear protective gear and remain cautious. Avoid using appliances or vehicles that the flood has affected until a professional inspects them.
- **Earthquakes.** Inspect yourself for injuries after an earthquake. Follow the instructions of local authorities and be prepared for aftershocks. Inspect your home for damage and leave if it seems unsafe. Wear protective clothing and be cautious of other hazards, such as fallen power lines or gas leaks, or fires that may start as a result. A hissing noise may mean a broken gas line. You should exit immediately and contact the fire department if you hear a leak or smell gas.

- **Landslides.** Landslides occur when earth moves gradually or quickly downward, often following other disasters such as heavy rain, flooding, and earthquakes. If a landslide happens, avoid the area in case another landslide occurs. Flooding also may occur during or after a landslide. Follow the guidance of local authorities to decide when it is safe to return home.
- **Winter Weather.** After a winter storm, avoid traveling until roads are clear or authorities say road conditions are safe to drive. Be cautious when clearing snow or walking on icy surfaces. Shoveling heavy snow can lead to overexertion. Also, sidewalks, driveways, and roads may be slippery and increase your chances of falling or injury. Watch for melting or falling ice or snow when outdoors. If you are out in the cold, take breaks to warm up and seek medical attention if you suspect frostbite or hypothermia. For information on avoiding, spotting, and treating frostbite or hypothermia, visit <https://www.cdc.gov/afghan-evac/pdf/avoid-spot-treat-hypothermia-frostbite.pdf>. Remember also to take precautions with your pet if you must take them outside.

Emotional Safety

There are many precautions you should take when recovering from a disaster. In addition to physically protecting yourself and your family, it is important to pay attention to your emotional well-being. You may experience a range of emotions and reactions depending on the trauma, damage, or loss you suffered. For more information on responding to trauma after a natural disaster, read the Kentucky Cooperative Extension publication, *Recognizing and Coping with Trauma after a Natural Disaster* HFD-IFD.001.

In addition to **988**, you can reach the Disaster Distress Helpline by calling **1-800-985-5990** or visiting <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>. The helpline provides free crisis counseling for those experiencing disaster-related emotional distress.



Volunteering

After a disaster, you might want to volunteer to help others. Kentucky Emergency Management (KYEM) employs a full-time volunteer coordinator to organize volunteer efforts. If you are interested in volunteering, KYEM recommends that you work with an established organization to provide help and resources. Volunteer organizations might include the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, American Red Cross, United Way, Habitat for Humanity, or local food banks, just to name a few.

Helping through a volunteer agency can provide you with supplies, direction, and liability coverage during your volunteer efforts. Disaster aid must be well-organized, as unexpected volunteers and supplies can inhibit the relief process and overwhelm communities already burdened by the disaster. Check with organizations to see what donations they need and where to send them before acting, as they may prefer that you send donations to a designated collection site. Be flexible with your volunteer role, as you may be needed in a way different from what you expected.

Resources and References:

American Red Cross, Types of Emergencies.

<https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies.html>

Centers for Disease Control, Clean Up Safely After a Disaster.

<https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/cleanup/facts.html>

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Recovering from Disaster. https://www.fema.gov/pdf/areyouready/recovering_from_disaster.pdf

Kentucky Emergency Management, Volunteer Coordination.

<https://kyem.ky.gov/recovery/Pages/Volunteer-Coordination.aspx>

National Weather Service, Safety Tips.

<https://www.weather.gov/safety/>

U.S. Department of Labor, Disaster Recovery Assistance

<https://www.dol.gov/general/disasterrecovery#safe>

This publication is part of the “In the Face of Disaster” Publication Series:

- Preparing Your Family and Home Before a Natural Disaster
- Protecting Your Family and Home After a Natural Disaster
- Considerations for Food and Water Before a Natural Disaster
- Keeping Food and Water Safe After a Natural Disaster
- Financial Considerations Before a Natural Disaster
- Financial Management After a Natural Disaster
- Considerations for Older Adults and People with Disabilities Before a Disaster
- Helping Older Adults and People with Disabilities Cope After a Disaster
- Navigating Trauma After a Natural Disaster

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