

What You Can Do to Prepare

1. Create an emergency communications plan

Choose an out-of-town contact your family or household will call or e-mail to check on each other should a disaster occur. Your selected contact should live far enough away that they would be unlikely to be directly affected by the same event, and they should know they are the chosen contact. Make sure every household member has that contact's, and each other's, e-mail addresses and telephone numbers (home, work, pager and cell). Leave these contact numbers at your children's schools, if you have children, and at your workplace. Your family should know that if telephones are not working, they need to be patient and try again later or try e-mail. Many people flood the telephone lines when emergencies happen, but e-mail can sometimes get through when calls don't.

Keep handy any important telephone numbers such as family members' work, school and home numbers, your physician's number, your pharmacy's number, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Texas (BCBSTX) customer service number, your property insurance agent number, and the numbers of a few immediate neighbors.

2. Establish a meeting place

Have a predetermined meeting place away from your home to save time and minimize confusion, should your home be affected or the area evacuated. You may even want to make arrangements to stay with a family member or friend in case of an emergency. Be sure to include any pets in these plans, since pets are not permitted in shelters and some hotels will not accept them. Have on hand your planned evacuation route as well as a road map of your locality. You may need to take alternative or unfamiliar routes if major roads are closed or clogged. Listen to local radio or TV stations for evacuation instructions. If advised to evacuate, do so immediately.

3. Assemble a disaster supply kit

If you need to evacuate your home or are asked to "shelter in place," have some essential supplies on hand that will make you and your family more comfortable. Prepare a disaster supply kit in an easy-to-carry container such as a duffel bag or small plastic trash can. Include "special needs" items for any member of your household (infant formula or items for people with disabilities or older people), first aid supplies and prescription medications, a change of clothing for each household member, a sleeping bag or bedroll for each, a cell phone and phone charger, a battery powered radio or television and extra batteries, food, bottled water and tools.

Have your medical and prescription insurance information on hand, either in your disaster kit or wallet. It is also a good idea to include some cash and copies of important family documents (birth certificates, passports and licenses) in your kit. Include in your kit instructions on how to turn off electricity, gas and water if authorities advise you to do so. (Remember, you'll need a professional to turn them back on.)

Copies of essential documents – like powers of attorney, birth and marriage certificates, insurance policies, life insurance beneficiary designations and a copy of your will – should

also be kept in a safe location outside your home. A safe deposit box or the home of a friend or family member who lives out of town is a good choice.

4. Check on the school emergency plan of any school-age children you may have

You will need to know if they will keep children at school until a parent or designated adult can pick them up or send them home on their own. Be sure that the school has updated information about how to reach parents and responsible caregivers to arrange for pickup. And, ask what type of authorization the school may require to release a child to someone you designate, if you are not able to pick up your child. During times of emergency the school telephones may be overwhelmed with calls.