

Hurricane Preparation: Evacuating Your Home¹

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Every year Floridians are faced with the possibility of hurricanes. Most years these dreaded storms do not land on our shores and mainland. However, in the not too distant past hurricanes have had devastating effects on many communities in Florida, and every year the possibility exists that communities will be hit by hurricanes during the summer and fall months.

During the months of potential hurricanes, it is important to plan for the worst and hope that it never happens. For example, you and your family may be asked to leave your home due to some emergency conditions in your community. Your local emergency officials will not ask you to leave your home or location unless there is a valid reason. Do not try and second-guess the validity of their request. Do as they say immediately. Most of the time these requests and related information will come through radio broadcasts or the local TV station. Different warning methods may be used, such as a siren or telephone calls.

Stay tuned and follow the directions and the evacuation routes recommended by the emergency officials. The most important thing to keep in mind is to have a plan for a possible evacuation. Be prepared to evacuate and keep the following suggestions in mind.

1. Know the Route and Follow Directions

Keep a map on hand that will enable you to take a route that may be unfamiliar to you. Be prepared to use routes specified by the emergency officials. Do not use any road or

shortcut that they do not recommend. Some areas familiar to you may no longer be accessible, or they may be dangerous for reasons unknown to you.

2. Local Authorities Will Tell You What to Do

Stay in touch with local authorities. They have contact with the state or federal authorities and will know which route to take and what local conditions might be. If you follow their instructions, you are more likely to arrive in a safe location and to be able to communicate with your family members or friends.

3. Keep Your Vehicle's Tank Filled

Gas stations may be closed during a hurricane and prior to its arrival. During power outages, fuel pumps at gas stations may not work. Prepare for the hurricane by filling your tank well in advance of the storm.

4. One Vehicle per Household

If it is necessary to evacuate, plan to take one vehicle per household. This will keep family members together and reduce the number of cars on your particular evacuation route.

5. Power Lines

Do not go near power lines, especially if they are broken or down.

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6. Clothing

Wear clothing that protects you as much as possible. Even though it is not cold during hurricane season, wear long sleeves and long pants. Wear sturdy shoes that will be suitable for walking, which you may or may not have to do. Take along a hat that can be used to shelter you from the sun.

7. Disaster Kit

Take your disaster kit with the supplies you will need. The kit should include items such as a battery-powered radio, extra batteries, food, water, and clothing. Make plans to have enough supplies for at least three days and more if possible.

8. Phone

Bring your cellular phone.

9. Prepare Your Home before Leaving

- Lock all doors and windows
- Turn off the electricity and water. You should know how to use the tools needed to do this, typically an adjustable pipe wrench and a crescent wrench.
- If you have food in a home freezer, your local officials will advise you as to whether or not to turn off electricity. You may lose power in which case the food will not keep for very long.
- Leave your natural gas on unless you are instructed to turn it off. You may need gas for heating or cooking and only a professional can turn it on once it has been turned off. In times of emergency, it may take days or weeks to get a professional to your home to turn on your gas once it has been turned off.

10. Family Communications

If you have time, call your family and friends. In any event, leave a note as to the route you are taking and your destination. Put your emergency communications plan into effect as follows.

- Choose an out of town contact your family or household members will call or email 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 household members have each other's contact information, including e-mail addresses and telephone numbers (home, work, pager, and cell). Leave these contact numbers at your workplace, and if you have children, at your children's school.
- 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 cannot.

11. Emergency Shelters

Know in advance where the emergency shelters are located in your vicinity. If there is more than one in your vicinity, know all the locations. The steps you should take in preparing for shelter depends on the type of emergency situation that results from a weather-related disaster. For example, during a tornado you should go to an underground room if it is available. During a hurricane, go to the most well fortified building in your location. These emergency shelters are usually announced well ahead of a hurricane warning.

12. Shelter in Place

If your emergency officials tell you to "shelter in place," this means that you should remain inside your home or office and protect yourself there.

- Close and lock all windows and exterior doors.
- Turn off all fans, heating, and air conditioning systems.
- Close the fireplace damper.
- Get your disaster kit and make sure your radio is working.
- Go to an interior room without windows that is above ground level.
- Keep listening to your radio or television until you are told all is safe or that you are to evacuate. The length of your stay can range from a few hours to two weeks. During this time you should maintain a 24-hour communications and safety watch. Take turns with family in listening for radio broadcasts.
- Assemble an emergency toilet, if necessary. Use a garbage container, pail, or bucket with a snug-fitting cover. If the container is small, use a larger container with a cover for waste disposal. Line both containers with plastic bags. After each use, pour or sprinkle a small amount of a regular household disinfectant, such as chlorine bleach, into the container to reduce odor or germs.

13. Predetermined Meeting Place

Have a predetermined destination for meeting your family in the event you are separated from them. This will save time and anxiety as well as minimize the confusion if you are told to evacuate. Have some prior arrangements with friends or family who may provide temporary shelter in case of emergency.

14. Children at School

Have a plan for who is to pick up the children from school or how they will be taken care of and by whom.

15. Animals and Pets

Have a plan for caring for animals in the event of an emergency evacuation. Make plans for where they will be sheltered.

These preparations can help ensure safety and peace of mind if a weather emergency occurs. Be aware that location-specific information will vary greatly even with the state or county. Become aware of conditions or situations in your area that would be important during a weather emergency.

References

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