

# Coping With an Earthquake

This guide provides information and resources designed to help older individuals who may be, or who may have been, affected by an earthquake.

## Safeguarding Yourself From Earthquakes

To protect yourself, your loved ones and your home from earthquakes, consider taking some proactive steps now. If you are rebuilding your home, learn about your area's local seismic building standards and safe land use codes. Many cities located near fault lines have developed codes and standards to protect property and occupants. The Red Cross and other organizations may also be able to provide safety tips that can help prepare your family in the event of future emergencies. *Note*—If you are elderly and live alone, have someone help you with these tasks.

### Consider the following tips:

- Pick safe places in each room of your home. A safe place may be under a heavy piece of furniture (such as a table or desk) that will protect you from falling objects or against an interior wall away from windows or tall objects (such as bookcases) that could fall on you.
  - Eliminate hazards. Make it as easy as possible to quickly get to a safe place for protection.
  - Practice “drop, cover and hold on.” Drop under a sturdy piece of furniture, hold on and cover your face and eyes by pressing your face against your arm. By practicing this simple response with your loved ones, you will all be able to respond quickly if an earthquake strikes, which will reduce your risk of injury.
  - Anchor special equipment such as telephones and life support systems. Fasten tanks of gas, such as oxygen, to the wall.
- Keep a list of medications, allergies, special equipment, names and numbers of doctors, pharmacists and family members. Make sure you have this list with you at all times.
  - Keep walking aids near you at all times. Have extra walking aids in different rooms of the house.
  - Put a security light in each room. These lights plug into any outlet and light up automatically if there is a loss of electricity. They continue operating automatically for four to six hours, and they can be turned off by hand in an emergency.
  - Make sure you have a whistle to signal for help.
  - Keep extra emergency supplies at your bedside.

**To protect yourself, your loved ones and your home from earthquakes, consider taking some proactive steps now. If you are rebuilding your home, learn about your area's local seismic building standards and safe land use codes. Many cities located near fault lines have developed codes and standards to protect property and occupants. The Red Cross and other organizations may also be able to provide safety tips that can help prepare your family in the event of future emergencies.**

- If you are elderly, or have special needs, find two people you trust who will check on you after an earthquake. Tell them your special needs. Show them how to operate any equipment you use. Show them where your emergency supplies are kept. Give them a spare key.
- If you live in an assisted living facility or retirement facility, they should already have emergency plans documented. Be sure you know how to respond.
- Assemble a disaster supplies kit that contains: a first aid kit, an emergency fund of cash, non-perishable food and a manual can opener, at least one gallon of water per person per day, protective clothing, battery-powered radio and flashlights (including extra batteries), and essential items for children, elderly loved ones and pets (medications, diapers, warm clothing, etc.). Prepare to be self-sufficient for at least three days.
- Check for hazards in your home; fasten heavy items such as shelves, light fixtures and water heaters securely.
- Make sure electrical wiring and gas connections are in good working order at all times. In the event of an earthquake, these could be fire hazards.
- Have an expert check your home for deep cracks in ceilings or the foundation.
- Talk to your insurance agent. Consider purchasing or renewing an earthquake insurance policy.

### **During and After an Earthquake**

- If you are in bed or sitting down, do not get up.
- If you are standing, duck and cover or sit down. You could be thrown to the floor if you are standing.
- Turn on your portable radio for instructions and news reports. For your own safety, cooperate fully with public safety officials and instructions.
- Do not try to leave the building during an earthquake because objects and debris can fall on you. It is safest to stay where you are until the shaking stops and you are sure it is safe to exit.
- If you are outdoors, it is typically best to move to a clear area, away from buildings, trees, power lines, streetlights or overpasses.
- If you are in a vehicle, try to move to a clear area, stop and stay inside the vehicle with your seatbelt on. Once the shaking has stopped, proceed cautiously and avoid bridges and ramps that may have been damaged or weakened.
- If you evacuate, leave a message at your home telling family members and others where you can be found.
- Prepare for aftershocks.

#### **If you are elderly or disabled, your kit should also contain the following supplies:**

- **An extra supply of prescription medications as well as a list of medications including dosage and any allergies**
- **Extra eyeglasses and hearing-aid batteries (remember to replace hearing aid and other batteries annually)**
- **Extra wheelchair batteries or other special equipment**
- **A list of the style and serial numbers of medical devices, such as pacemakers**
- **Copies of medical insurance and Medicare cards**
- **List of doctors and emergency contacts**

## Disaster Relief

In the aftermath of an earthquake, there may be many pressing issues to take care of, but it is essential that your first priority be your own safety—and that of your loved ones. If you are in need of emergency services (shelter, clothing, food, money, etc.), contact one of the many emergency hotlines listed in the “Emergency Resources” section of this guide. In addition, safeguard yourself and your loved ones by taking the following tips into consideration:

- Listen to a portable radio for information on shelters, helpful resources and safety advisories.
- If you are elderly or disabled, contact your city or county government’s emergency information management office for information on shelters for the elderly and those requiring special assistance. Additionally, many local offices keep lists of people with disabilities so they can be located quickly in a sudden emergency.
- Stay out of and away from damaged buildings. If you had to evacuate, return home only when authorities say it is safe.
- If you have children or grandchildren with you, make sure they are constantly supervised.
- Be alert for potential hazards. Take extreme care when moving in an area damaged by an earthquake. It is possible that shattered glass, splintered wood or other sharp objects will be strewn around.
- Be prepared for aftershocks. Aftershocks may occur during the hours, weeks or months after an earthquake and, although smaller than the main quake, they may cause additional damage, especially to already-weakened structures.
- Cooperate with authorities. Whether you’re asked to relinquish telephone lines, keep off emergency roads or given other directions, do your best to comply.

- Use caution when traveling. Earthquakes can create weakened roads or bridges and broken or downed live power lines. If you are elderly or disabled and need assistance with transportation, contact your city or county government’s emergency information management office.
- Be cautious with food. When electricity is out, refrigerated foods can spoil quickly; throw out any food that is questionable. Frozen foods will typically last in a closed freezer for several days.
- Be cautious with drinking water. Earthquakes can cause damage to city water supplies and sewage systems. Radio reports will typically notify residents if the water is safe to drink. Try to drink bottled water until you know for sure. On average, you need one gallon of water per person, per day. (*Tip*—You can obtain safe water by melting ice cubes.)

**In the aftermath of an earthquake, it is essential that your first priority be your own safety—and that of your loved ones. If you are in need of emergency services (shelter, clothing, food, money, etc.), contact one of the emergency hotlines listed in the “Emergency Resources” section of this guide.**

## Caring for Yourself

Disasters such as this can result in extreme emotions including stress, helplessness, fear, irritability, anger and depression. Depending on the severity of the earthquake, you may also suffer from nightmares, shock, loss of appetite and the inability to concentrate. All of these reactions and feelings are normal, but if you do not address them, you can jeopardize your health. If you or a loved one are unable to cope, do not hesitate to get help. Many temporary shelters offer free counseling services to victims—or referrals to professionals who can provide further assistance.

### In addition, consider the following tips:

- Learn to pay attention to your feelings and respond to your needs—even if you just need time alone to cry.
- Have realistic expectations and goals.
- Reach out to supportive friends and family for comfort and guidance.
- Be patient and give yourself plenty of time to recover and rest.
- Try to maintain a nutritious diet to keep your energy up.
- Focus on your breathing—deep, slow breaths will help calm you.
- Join a support group. You can find support groups through your doctor, listed in your local newspaper or through local Red Cross chapters.
- If you work, ask your employer if it offers an EAP (Employee Assistance Program). An EAP counselor can provide counseling on a wide range of issues, including stress, anxiety, dealing with a tragedy and more.

**If are elderly, or have special needs, you may require additional help and coping skills. Rely on trusted friends or neighbors for support or seek help from health care workers, professionals or city management emergency workers.**

### What to Do if Your Home Is Damaged or Destroyed

When assessing the damage to your home, use extreme caution. Watch for hidden dangers: falling structures, sharp metal, fires and other potential hazards.

### The following tips may help:

- If you smell gas or hear a blowing or hissing noise, you may have a gas leak. In this case, open a window and quickly leave. Turn off the gas at the outside main valve, if possible, and call the gas company from a neighbor's telephone or a mobile or pay phone. Note—If you turn off the gas, it must be turned back on by a professional.
- Clean up spilled medicines, bleaches, gasoline or other flammable liquids immediately.
- If you see sparks or broken or frayed wires, or if you smell hot insulation, call an electrician. You may need to turn off the electricity at the main fuse box or circuit breaker; however, if there is a lot of water on the ground, this may be hazardous, so have an electrician do it for you.
- If you suspect sewage lines have been damaged, avoid using toilets and call a plumber. If water pipes have been damaged, contact the water company and avoid using water from the tap.
- Consider hiring a reliable contractor—but beware of frauds who prey on disaster victims. Your best bet is to get a reference from friends, neighbors or co-workers who have had home improvement work done. Get written estimates from several firms. Ask for explanations in price variations. Don't automatically choose the lowest bidder. Be sure to get a signed contract from any contractor you agree to work with.
- If you are a senior and live in an assisted living facility or retirement facility, the director should advise you of any damage and what steps, if any, you will need to take.

**When assessing the damage to your home, use extreme caution. Watch for hidden dangers: falling structures, sharp metal, fires and other potential hazards.**

## Home Owner's and Renter's Insurance

If you have insurance, make a detailed list of the damages and contact your insurance representative as soon as possible. If you aren't able to call from home, tell your agent where you can be reached—and try to be patient. Where there is extensive and widespread damage, insurance representatives usually handle claims on an as-needed basis, beginning with the most serious situations.

Property insurance typically protects against the financial loss due to damages incurred to real and/or personal property, but policies vary, and many have exclusions. Therefore, it is important to read your policy carefully and contact your agent with specific questions about coverage or the claims process.

### **If Your Home Is Damaged:**

- **Take pictures of the damage—both to the house and its contents—for insurance purposes.**
- **Make temporary repairs to prevent further damage from rain, wind or looting. If windows are broken, nail boards or staple-gun heavy plastic or tarps in their place.**
- **Keep all repair receipts for your insurance agent.**

## Helping Children Cope

Natural disasters are stressful for everyone, but children may need extra help coping. A child's reaction will vary depending on his or her personality and age. Infants may become more irritable or fearful. Toddlers and preschoolers will probably feel frightened, insecure or helpless, and may display regressive behavior such as clinginess or separation anxiety. School-aged children may become preoccupied or fearful and experience stress-related physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches. And preteens and teenagers may feel invincible, display reckless behavior, withdraw or become hostile. Since children do not have the same coping skills as adults, they will need your love, support, guidance and reassurance.

## The following tips may help you help children affected by earthquakes:

- Answer any questions with simple, honest, accurate answers. If you don't know the answer, say you will try to find out.
- Talk about your own fears and stresses so children understand, but do not unnecessarily scare them with too many details.
- Don't make false promises; instead, set realistic goals.
- Make time for children and pay extra attention to their needs.
- If you are in a shelter, reassure children that this situation will be temporary.
- Encourage children to play (in safe areas).
- Maintain regular routines if at all possible. For example, even in a shelter, you can still have a bedtime routine such as reading or storytelling before children go to sleep.

## Emergency Resources

After a disaster such as an earthquake, shelters are usually set up (in churches, schools, etc.) to provide food, shelter, first aid—and possibly counseling to those affected. To find the shelter nearest you, check your local newspaper, contact your local Red Cross chapter or emergency management service, or call one of the hotlines listed. In addition, some of these organizations may be able to provide temporary housing or financial aid to those who have lost their homes.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)  
800-621-FEMA (800-621-3362)  
<http://www.fema.gov>

Red Cross  
800-REDCROSS (800-733-2767)  
<http://www.redcross.org>

The Salvation Army  
615 Slaters Lane  
P.O. Box 269  
Alexandria, VA 22313  
703-684-5500  
<http://www.salvationarmyusa.org>

*Note*—For those who would like to help, these organizations are always seeking volunteers and donations (food, clothing, baby formula and diapers—and financial aid). As needs vary by location and continually change in the days following natural disasters, it is best to call these agencies for a list of specific needs before you make a donation or to see how volunteers are needed.

161\_CopingWithAnEarthquake