

Preparing for a Disaster

By Megan McGibney



Some disasters cannot be stopped. These disasters include earthquakes and tornadoes. Tornadoes ruin whatever is in their path. They can destroy houses and other buildings. Earthquakes have a wider range of intensity—some are so small that no one even notices them, except for the people checking earthquake monitoring equipment. Others have leveled cities. It is very hard to deal with these disasters, and it can take a very long time for life to get back to normal.

Because earthquakes and tornadoes are forces of nature, people have to deal with them as they come. The time or intensity of an earthquake cannot usually be predicted. Tornadoes form when the right conditions are met, so a warning would be given once the conditions are detected. But there is still very little time to get ready once a tornado warning is issued. That's why planning for disaster ahead of time is so important. With proper preparation, we can minimize the disaster's impact.

Earthquakes cannot be reliably predicted. While volcanic activity sometimes triggers earthquakes, many other earthquakes happen without warning. Fortunately, we do know the areas where earthquakes are most likely to occur. The people who live in these places, such as California, Japan, or Italy, know what to do when the ground begins to shake. If they are indoors, they will get away from windows and exterior walls and take cover under a desk or table. If there is no desk around, they can stand against an interior wall, that is, a wall whose

other side is not the outside of the building. It is important to take cover in an area that is safe from potential falling objects, such as wall decor, appliances, or furniture. As you can see, people who live in an earthquake territory need to be very aware of their surroundings.

If people are outside during an earthquake, it is best to get into an open spot. They should get away from buildings, power lines, and anything else that may fall and hurt them. Electrical lines which have already fallen are also dangerous—they may be capable of electrocuting people!

Earthquakes can be incredibly destructive, even if they do not last very long. The majority last less than a minute, but there are often aftershocks—smaller earthquakes that occur minutes or hours after the first one. Of course, it all depends on the size of the quake; most are small and don't have much impact. But the big ones can wreak havoc, especially if the area is not prepared. In places where earthquakes often strike, there are strict codes for buildings with the goal that earthquakes would not cause serious damage. These buildings must be built in such a way that they likely would not fall apart as a result of a big quake. Places like Japan and California have much stricter building codes than places without such a high earthquake risk. But even these rigorous codes sometimes fail to protect people; the disastrous 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake destroyed the city of Kobe, Japan, and killed over 5,500 people.

Knowing what to do when earthquakes happen usually saves lives. The same goes for tornadoes. While some places get tornadoes more than others, it is not easy to predict them. There may be warnings that they will happen, but tornadoes cannot be predicted in the same way rainstorms can, days before they happen.

In order to be safe when a tornado does strike, people must already know where they will find shelter. Families and schools must have tornado drills and discuss where to go once a tornado has been spotted. The best place to go to is a basement. If there is no basement, then people should go into hallways or rooms with no windows on the ground floor. Tornadoes can be strong enough to break windows, which can injure anyone nearby. Even after finding

shelter in a basement or windowless room, people should cover themselves with a mattress or other padding in case the tornado damages the ceiling and debris falls through.

People who are outdoors when a tornado hits should seek shelter in a building. If that isn't possible, they must lie flat on low ground away from vehicles, trees, or anything else the tornado might fling about. As with an earthquake, it is important to protect one's head and neck by covering them with one's arms. One of the worst places to be during a tornado is in a car, truck, or bus, because those can easily be thrown around, or simply hit with other flying debris. Tornadoes are very powerful and can even move trailer homes. Anyone in a mobile home during a tornado should leave and seek shelter elsewhere immediately.

Just as places with earthquakes have special building codes, places plagued by tornadoes often have building codes designed to protect buildings from strong winds. People can also build extra-strong safe rooms to weather the storm in. But often nothing can stop this natural disaster from doing a lot of damage.

Although scientists are trying to find better ways to predict these two natural disasters, it is still very hard to know exactly when they will hit and how much damage they will do. In the meantime, people must always be aware that an earthquake or tornado can happen without warning. The important thing is to be prepared and take precautions to stay safe from harm. Buildings can be restored, but lives cannot.